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**POLICY BRIEF**

**Role of Youth in the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists 2026**

**Executive Summary**

Youth engagement is paramount for the long-term sustainability of pastoralism and the effective realization of the goals of the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) 2026. Despite their inherent connection to these vital ecosystems and livelihoods, Pastoralist youth face significant barriers to active participation and leadership. These obstacles include limited access to land and mobility, weak representation in governance structures, inadequate access to technology and digital resources, heightened vulnerability to climate change impacts, and the alarming erosion of traditional ecological knowledge.

The IYRP 2026 presents a unique and timely opportunity to address these challenges and empower young pastoralists as key change agents. By actively involving youth, we can foster the sustainability of pastoral systems by adopting innovative and climate-resilient practices, facilitating crucial intergenerational knowledge transfer to preserve invaluable traditional ecological knowledge, and ensuring secure and diversified livelihoods that build upon the strengths of pastoralism while embracing modern opportunities.

This policy brief underscores the urgent need for the meaningful inclusion of youth in all aspects of IYRP 2026 initiatives. It analyses the key challenges hindering their participation, highlights the critical contributions they can make, and proposes concrete policy recommendations. A central recommendation is convening ***" A Thousand Pastoralist Youth Summit"*** as a significant build-up event to IYRP 2026. This summit would serve as a pivotal platform for empowering young pastoralists, amplifying their voices, and shaping a vibrant and sustainable future for rangelands and pastoralist communities worldwide.

**Context and Importance of Youth in Pastoral Systems**

Pastoralism is a time-tested livestock-keeping system that specializes in taking advantage of environmental variability. It is an innovative system that farms with nature, holding largely untapped potential for income growth and employment in marginal areas such as drylands and mountain regions. Globally, it is estimated that over 180 million people are involved in pastoral and agropastoral systems, living in approximately 75 percent of countries. These systems are emblematic of farming systems that work with nature, having evolved to function with the natural environment and its inherent variability. By managing grazing itineraries at various scales, pastoralists ensure their livestock feed better than without a herder, effectively reducing the variability of outputs like animal production and household food security.

Pastoralism makes significant contributions to global food security, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience. It is often the predominant, and sometimes the only possible, food production strategy in the world’s permanent grasslands, which cover approximately two-thirds of agricultural land globally. Well-developed and fair pastoral value chains can provide equitable economic opportunities and contribute to ending extreme poverty. Pastoralism requires little fossil energy and is solar-powered, as animals graze naturally without the need for cultivation and transportation of feed. Moreover, pastoral herds and flocks have been bred for resilience for thousands of years, resulting in some of the highest levels of diversity of any breeding population. This livestock biodiversity represents crucial assets for humanity in adapting to climate change.

Youth constitute a significant demographic within pastoralist communities, representing the future of these systems. However, the long-term viability of pastoralist livelihoods is at risk as traditional knowledge erodes and youth migration to urban centers increases. This migration is often driven by a lack of opportunities, resources, tenure security, and recognition within pastoralism. Failing to engage and empower pastoralist youth not only jeopardizes the continuation of these crucial livelihood systems but also risks the loss of invaluable traditional ecological knowledge and the undermining of the numerous environmental and economic benefits that pastoralism provides.

The International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP) 2026, as declared by the United Nations General Assembly, presents a critical opportunity to raise awareness of the global significance of rangelands and pastoralism and to direct attention to their contribution to achieving sustainable development. To fully realize the potential of IYRP 2026, it is essential to actively involve pastoralist youth in all its initiatives. Engaging young people can revitalize pastoralist economies, preserve cultural heritage, and strengthen climate adaptation strategies.

**Challenges Facing Pastoralist Youth**

Pastoralist youth worldwide face a multitude of interconnected challenges that hinder their participation and threaten their future within pastoral systems:

1. **Limited Land Access and Mobility:** Barriers to accessing grazing land are a major obstacle for young pastoralists. This is due to various factors, including land conversion for agriculture, mining operations, conservation efforts that restrict access to protected areas, and infrastructure projects like energy plants. The loss of rangelands and restrictions on mobility directly contradict the pastoral way of life, which relies on flexibility in search of good pasture and water dictated by environmental variability. For instance, the Lake Turkana wind power project in Kenya is cited as an example of a project that has grabbed massive pastoralist pasture land. Similarly, evictions of Maasai pastoralists in Tanzania further exemplify this challenge.
2. **Weak Governance and Youth Representation:** Young pastoralists are often excluded from decision-making processes at local, national, and even international levels. This lack of representation leads to policies and interventions that do not reflect their specific needs, aspirations, and perspectives. The absence of active participation in formulating influential documents and making reports related to pastoralism and rangelands further marginalizes their voices. Moreover, challenges exist in succession planning and governance transition from older to younger generations within pastoralist communities.
3. **Lack of Access to Technology and Digital Tools:** A significant digital gap isolates many pastoral youths from the rapid advancements shaping the modern world. This includes inadequate digital infrastructure in remote pastoral areas, the high costs of internet access and devices, and limited digital literacy among youth. This digital divide hinders their ability to compete in technology-driven economies and restricts opportunities for innovation within their communities. Limited access also affects their ability to engage with markets, financial services, healthcare, and educational resources.
4. **Climate Change Vulnerabilities:** Pastoralist livelihoods are highly exposed to the adverse effects of climate change, including extreme weather events such as droughts, floods, and heatwaves. Integrating traditional forecasting methods with modern meteorological technology is essential for improving resilience. Sustainable rangeland management practices and agroecological approaches are crucial for maintaining healthy ecosystems and ensuring the long-term viability of pastoralist communities in the face of climate variability.
5. **Erosion of Indigenous Knowledge:** Rapid modernization, urbanization, and shifting cultural values have led to the loss of indigenous practices crucial for sustainable pastoralism. This includes knowledge of seasonal migration patterns, drought prediction, traditional rangeland restoration techniques, traditional animal breeding, and transhumance. This knowledge is often orally transmitted, making it vulnerable to generational loss due to the disengagement of youth. Formal documentation efforts are often fragmented, underfunded, or fail to prioritize pastoralist participation.
6. **High Entry Barriers to Pastoralism:** Pastoralist youth face numerous high entry barriers, including land tenure insecurity, climate challenges, knowledge gaps, economic constraints, policy exclusion, and legal and bureaucratic hurdles. These barriers discourage their active involvement and perpetuation of pastoral livelihoods.

**The Critical Need for Youth Involvement**

Meaningful engagement of pastoralist youth is not merely a matter of equity; it is a fundamental necessity for the sustainability and future prosperity of pastoral systems. Their involvement is crucial for:

1. Sustainability of Pastoral Systems: Youth are the future stewards of rangelands and livestock. Their adoption and implementation of sustainable land management practices such as community-driven approaches to rangeland management, recognizing Indigenous knowledge and innovation, involving local communities in decision-making, waterpoint sharing and management, rotational grazing, and sacred forest conservation are vital for the long-term health and productivity of these ecosystems. Integrating climate change adaptation strategies into resource management through sustainable practices like rotational grazing enhances resilience and long-term viability. By addressing high entry barriers, youth can access land, participate in governance, and maintain their pastoral mobility and flexibility, ensuring the continuation of adaptive pastoral practices.
2. Intergenerational Knowledge Transfer: The rich body of traditional ecological knowledge held by elder pastoralists is at risk of being lost if effective mechanisms for intergenerational transfer are not established. This knowledge, encompassing areas like herding practices, ethnoveterinary medicine, weather prediction indicators, conflict management, and land-use negotiation, is essential for the resilience and adaptability of pastoral systems. Actively involving youth in documenting and learning these practices through intergenerational storytelling, community mapping, and elder-youth mentorship programs is crucial for its preservation and application. Combining Indigenous knowledge with modern technology can create hyper-local early warning systems and predictive models for droughts, disease outbreaks, and pasture regeneration, blending traditional indicators with real-time climate data. Establishing community hubs where elders train youth in traditional knowledge while youth contribute digital literacy skills to document these practices will further strengthen this transfer.
3. Secure Livelihoods: Empowering youth to build secure livelihoods is essential for retaining them within pastoralism and ensuring the economic viability of these communities. This includes encouraging youth to explore complementary sectors such as livestock products processing, agribusiness, and value chains that can enhance pastoral economies. Facilitating access to both formal schooling and specialized training relevant to pastoralism, such as shepherding schools, will build their capacity. Technology-driven solutions, including agribusiness innovations, e-commerce platforms, and remote work opportunities, can enable pastoral youth to diversify their income sources and create sustainable businesses. Digital financial services like mobile banking and digital payments can also facilitate secure transactions and financial inclusion. Elevating the status of pastoralism, celebrating its cultural heritage and ecological knowledge, and encouraging youth to take pride in their pastoral lifestyles can also reduce youth migration away from pastoralism. Addressing poor market infrastructure and price control mechanisms will ensure fair prices and competitive markets, making pastoralism economically attractive.

**Policy Analysis**

Current policies related to pastoralism, while often recognizing the importance of sustainable land management and pastoralist rights, frequently lack targeted strategies for the specific engagement and empowerment of young people. National and international frameworks may mention the need for inclusivity but often fail to translate this into concrete actions and resource allocation for youth participation mostly ending at just having the bare minimum to help check some boxes.

Opportunities exist to significantly improve youth engagement by integrating youth-focused strategies into existing policy frameworks. This includes:

1. **Strengthening Education and Training:** Policies should prioritize expanding mobile and digital learning opportunities tailored to pastoralist livelihoods, integrating traditional knowledge with modern techniques.
2. **Enhancing Land Access and Tenure Security:** Implementing youth-inclusive land policies is crucial to supporting young pastoralists in maintaining their traditions and accessing essential resources. Recognizing customary land rights is vital for protecting pastoralist heritage and ensuring tenure security for youth
3. **Promoting Youth Leadership and Representation:** Policies must actively ensure that young people have seats at decision-making tables within pastoralist governance structures at all levels, from local communities to international forums
4. **Fostering Innovation and Economic Opportunities:** Supporting youth-led enterprises in sustainable livestock management, eco-tourism, and digital solutions for rangeland monitoring should be a policy priority, including providing access to funding and technical assistance.
5. **Bridging Traditional and Modern Knowledge Systems:** Policies should promote and fund initiatives that integrate indigenous knowledge with modern technology to enhance climate resilience and resource management, with active youth participation in these processes.

**Policy Recommendations**

To ensure the meaningful involvement of pastoralist youth in IYRP 2026 and to harness their potential for a sustainable pastoral future, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

* **Develop a Global Youth Engagement Strategy for IYRP 2026:** This comprehensive strategy should outline specific initiatives and activities aimed at actively involving pastoralist youth throughout the International Year. It should include mentorship programs linking experienced pastoralists with young individuals, youth-led dialogues and workshops to gather their perspectives and priorities, and dedicated platforms for knowledge exchange and networking among young pastoralists globally.
* **Increase Investment in Tailored Education and Vocational Training:** Governments, international organizations, and NGOs should significantly increase investment in educational programs specifically designed for pastoralist youth. These curricula should integrate traditional ecological knowledge with modern techniques in sustainable rangeland management, livestock health, and climate adaptation. Support for mobile and digital learning opportunities is essential to reach youth in remote areas. Additionally, vocational training programs focused on skills relevant to diversified livelihoods within and complementary to pastoralism, such as agribusiness, digital literacy, and renewable energy, should be expanded.
* **Secure Youth Access to Land and Resources:** Policies should establish clear mechanisms for young pastoralists to acquire land rights and access essential natural resources. This includes reforming land tenure systems to recognize customary rights and ensure that youth are included in land governance discussions and decision-making processes. Financial support and access to credit tailored to the needs of young pastoralists should also be provided to facilitate their entry into and sustainability within pastoralists.
* **Support Youth Entrepreneurship in Pastoral Economies:** Dedicated funding programs, grants, and technical assistance initiatives should be introduced to support youth-led sustainable businesses in pastoral economies. This includes ventures in sustainable livestock management, value addition to pastoral products, and digital solutions for rangeland monitoring and market access. Innovation hubs and mentorship programs can further equip young entrepreneurs with the necessary skills and resources.
* **Enhance Digital Inclusion and Connectivity:** Concerted efforts are needed to expand access to digital tools and connectivity in pastoralist areas. This requires investment in infrastructure, subsidies to reduce internet costs and device affordability, and the implementation of culturally relevant digital literacy training programs. Developing mobile applications and platforms that provide access to market information, financial services, weather forecasts, and educational resources tailored to pastoralist needs is crucial.
* **Formalize and Protect Indigenous Knowledge:** Community-led research initiatives should be supported to document traditional pastoral practices and knowledge systems. These initiatives should prioritize participatory, culturally sensitive methods such as intergenerational storytelling and community mapping, ensuring that pastoralists co-design documentation processes to safeguard intellectual property rights and maintain contextual accuracy. Efforts should also focus on integrating this knowledge with modern climate adaptation strategies and technologies.
* **Strengthen Pastoralist Youth Representation in Governance:** Policies at local, national, and international levels must actively ensure the meaningful inclusion of young pastoralists in policy discussions and decision-making processes. This includes creating dedicated seats for youth representatives in relevant committees and forums, supporting youth-led advocacy organizations, and ensuring their active participation in IYRP 2026 initiatives and global fora.
* **Foster Climate-Resilient Rangeland Management:** Support for community-driven approaches to sustainable rangeland management should be prioritized. This includes recognizing and supporting indigenous practices such as rotational grazing, water-sharing initiatives, and sustainable pasture conservation programs. Integrating traditional ecological knowledge with modern climate science will enhance the effectiveness of these efforts.
* **Convene a "Thousand Pastoralist Youth Summit" as a Build-Up to IYRP 2026:** As a significant pre-event to the International Year, a global summit bringing together at least one thousand pastoralist youth from diverse regions should be organized. This summit would provide a crucial platform for:
  + Amplifying Youth Voices: Creating a space for young pastoralists to articulate their specific needs, challenges, and priorities related to land rights, education, technology, livelihoods, and governance.
  + Knowledge Sharing and Innovation: Facilitating the exchange of innovative ideas, sustainable practices, and technological solutions developed by young pastoralists from different cultural and environmental contexts.
  + Networking and Partnership Building: Enabling young leaders to connect, as well as with relevant stakeholders including policymakers, researchers, NGOs, and private sector actors, to foster collaborations and build supportive networks.
  + Developing a Youth Declaration for IYRP 2026: Collectively drafting a declaration outlining the key demands and recommendations of pastoralist youth to be presented and considered during the International Year.
  + Capacity Building: Conducting targeted workshops and training sessions on leadership skills, digital literacy, sustainable rangeland management techniques, entrepreneurship, and advocacy strategies to empower young pastoralists as effective agents of change.

**Sources**Key messages document developed by the Youth Working Group

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