



2026 IYRP Pastoral Commons Conceptual Framing¹

Summary:

There is a strong and growing scientific and political awareness that the commons can be a positive resource for environmental conservation, local peoples' well-being and global sustainability. They are also described as Indigenous Peoples and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) under the umbrella of the main international environmental and development agencies (e.g. CBD, IUCN, UNEP, UNDP). According to UNEP-WCMC and ICCAc (2021), commons cover at least a fifth of the world's land surface, and overlap with many Key Biodiversity Areas, strategic carbon sinks and other environmentally sensitive areas. In most countries, a major proportion of rangelands is held in common and allows for mobility of pastoralism, which is environmentally conscientious. Pastoralists are renowned for having developed some of the most paradigmatic forms of customary legal systems over millennia and up to the present in these areas. In such systems, rules and ways to implement them are discussed and established collectively by community members for sustainable use of the rangelands. However, there is very little empirical, comparative, holistic and systematic research that identifies the social and environmental values and benefits of the different pastoral commons. Such information can unveil trends in land use and better inform policymakers. This conceptual framework sets a base to gather the existent evidence, to call attention to the inherent values of pastoral commons, and to stress that the multifaceted "invisible reality" of these systems can no longer be ignored.

Full text:

Since Elinor Ostrom's seminal work on the governance of the commons (e.g. 1990), for which she was awarded the Nobel prize in 2009, it has been widely accepted that commons are composed of three interrelated elements: (1) a shared natural resource, ecosystem or territory; (2) a community of users; and (3) collectively negotiated rules, norms and cultural values that evolve over time to ensure the sustainable use of those resources, as commoners are the first interested in the protection of the resources on which their livelihoods depend. At the same time, it has been recognised that *commoning* is not only positive at different levels, socially and environmentally as we detail below, but also in many cases the only way possible to sustain many farming families in certain contexts.

Commons are primarily constituted through relationships among users themselves and between users and resources or the nature they steward (Barrière and Bonnet, 2023). From this perspective, pastoral commons cannot be reduced to communities, pasturelands, fodder, governance arrangements, or ownership structure in isolation. Rather, they are social-ecological and holistic systems that are simultaneously natural and cultural, encompassing commoners themselves – rights holders and stewards in Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups –, their adaptive governance institutions, and ecosystems, landscapes, and territories they collectively manage.

Each pastoral common is a distinct system with significant [social](#), [cultural](#), [environmental](#) and [economic](#) values, as well as specific [legal foundations](#) and true [political potentials](#). Taken together, pastoral commons make an outstanding overall contribution to [global sustainability](#), and to the important [ecological and cultural transition](#) required today. These systems have typically evolved over generations through processes of experimentation, learning and adaptation, demonstrating in this way their resilience and long-term sustainability. Long considered rigid and archaic, pastoral commons are increasingly recognised for their dynamism and capacity to adapt to environmental and societal change. This growing

¹ This Conceptual Framing was written by Francisco Godoy-Sepúlveda, Santiago A. Parra, Pau Sanosa-Cols, Adrià Peña-Enguix, Daniel Maghanjo Mwamidi and Pablo Domínguez (the PICCAHer team), with valuable feedback from experts and civil society representatives in the Working Sub-Group on Pastoral Commons, and a particularly careful proofreading by Adrian Cullis. The Working Sub-Group is part of the Working Group on Pastoralists and Land Rights of the [Global Alliance](#) for the [International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists](#) (IYRP) 2026. The Pastoral Commons Working Sub-Group aims to foster collaboration between pastoral rights holders, Indigenous institutions, local communities, civil society organizations, researchers, and public agencies to turn knowledge and lived experience on pastoral commons into coordinated action. It does so by documenting their contributions, highlighting the value of the commons to strengthen governance, and supporting legal, policy, and market conditions at different scales, thus contributing to the IYRP 2026 and wider global efforts.

scientific and political recognition is reflected in their increasing consideration as Indigenous Peoples and Community Conserved Areas (ICCAs) or Territories of Life (e.g. [ICCA](#), [CBD](#), [IUCN](#), [UNEP](#) and [UNDP](#)).

The relevance of pastoral commons can be assessed across several interrelated dimensions:

1. Geographically: Pastoralism occurs on roughly half of the world's land surface, and a substantial portion of these rangelands – likely a majority, and that would oust the estimations by UNEP-WCMC and ICCAc pointed at in the summary – is governed collectively. They span diverse environments, including mountain pastures and grasslands to savannahs, tundra, steppes, deserts, deltas and wetlands (Estell et al. 2012; Reid et al. 2014). Without access to large communal grazing areas, mobile pastoralism would be unviable in most cases, because – without the possibility of mobility – pastoralism would collapse.



Herders organise their herds during transhumance along Spain's Drove Road System @ P. Sanosa

2. Politically: Pastoralists have developed highly adaptive forms of collective governance supported by dynamic customary systems (IUCN 2011). Rules governing access, timing and intensity of grazing are collectively defined according to ecological conditions, social relations, agro-pastoral needs and cultural contexts. While inequalities persist – particularly regarding gender and age, but also higher-income households versus lower-income ones – communal organisation generally allows greater participation and more equilibrated and equitable access to rangelands than private or open-access systems. Seasonal mobility, priority use rights within ancestral territories and coordination allow access to all members of the common, although with varying numbers of animals depending on the economic and political status of each family or group, and enable adaptation to environmental variability. In arid and semi-arid regions, where forage and water resources are scarce and unpredictable, such

political systems are particularly critical. For example, during periods of abundance, regulations may be relaxed, while periods of scarcity require stricter application of collective coordination and respect of the rules in place.

3. Socio-culturally: Pastoral commons are governed by highly participatory decision-making, which are rooted in a strong system of moral values underlying the different cultures that bear these tribal or community systems, contributing centrally to social structuration and resilience. Listening, negotiating, collective conflict resolution, coordination and mutual support, cement social stability. But beyond social cohesion, these communal institutions also fundamentally sustain and drive cultural vitality through ritual gatherings, knowledge exchange, and maintaining a very rich living tangible and intangible heritage.

4. Agro-economically: Well-managed pastoral commons are highly productive and sustainable. They most often generate increased forage availability and healthier livestock than systems lacking collective regulation. Access to communal grazing areas represents a substantial share of pastoralists' production and is essential for the year-round viability of these systems. For example, during periods when alternative feed sources are scarce or practically non-existent, commons frequently provide vital resources playing a role of "rangeland banks", and therefore contributing directly to the continuity of the agro-pastoral system as a whole, creating food security and food sovereignty for millions of people worldwide (Krätli et al. 2013; Reid et al. 2014).

5. Environmentally: Pastoral commons, through their collective management of rangelands, support ecological integrity through close and continuous monitoring of resource use by pastoralists themselves, as their livelihoods depend directly on the health of these ecosystems. Pastoralists regulate disturbance regimes at sustainable levels and have a low ecological footprint with few external inputs through grazing controlled by these institutions of collective governance. High livestock mobility heavily driven by communal approaches, preserves landscape connectivity and enhances carbon sequestration, mainly accumulating in the soil, providing a relatively secure carbon stock that is less prone to wildfire loss than is forest biomass (Krätli et al. 2013; Ostrom 1990; Briske et al. 2025). In these ways, pastoral commons contribute to

biodiversity conservation, soil and water protection, and climate adaptation through highly resilient systems (Auclair and Alifriqui 2012; Zanjani et al. 2023). Community-based grazing rules prevent both over- and under-grazing, ensure vegetation recovery, and promote ecosystem heterogeneity and resilience (Jode 2014; Parra et al. 2025; Dominguez et al. 2012; Forrest et al. 2016). Moreover, in many regions, community governance remains the most effective – and often the only – form of protecting rangelands from degradation.

6. Legally: Pastoral commons face significant challenges as the result of the shift toward entrepreneurial and industrial forms of agriculture that has weakened community practices in many contexts (Sa Rego et al., 2022) and contributed to the erosion of collective duties and responsibilities (Joye and Le Roy 2022). However, they still constitute a myriad of thousands of different regulatory systems adapted to each socio-environmental context – a true repository of know-how and co-habitation between and within communities (Nikolakis 2025). Modern states often struggle to recognise the stabilising ecological and social role of the commons, despite clear evidence of their capacity for local monitoring, adaptive management, and social cohesion (Chavanon and Joye 2025). Analysing these tensions reveals that the viability of pastoral commons depends on a balanced articulation between local governance institutions, public authorities, and legal frameworks, in which the state acts as a supportive facilitator rather than an authoritarian substitute that undermines commons-based governance. See as good examples the case of the [Regole d'Ampezzo](#) in Italy of the [project Valcom](#) in France.



Different herds grazing common land in Kenya @ C. Bedelian

Despite their vast contributions, pastoral commons continue to face severe **threats** from nationalisation, privatisation, restrictive public policies, top-down conservation approaches, certain climate finance mechanisms, extractive industries and other competing land uses as military grounds or windmill and solar panel farms (López-i-Gelats et al. 2016; Postigo 2021). Their erosion leads to the loss of livelihoods, social networks, cultural heritages, collective ecological stewardship, biodiversity and a myriad of ecosystem services (Burnett 2024; Burnett 2026). Safeguarding pastoral commons therefore requires rights-based and commons-centred policies that protect mobility, flexibility, and collective decision-making across shifting ecological and social conditions (Burnett 2025; Li and Huntsinger 2011; Ellis and Swift 1988; Fernandez-Gimenez and Le Febvre 2006). Protecting pastoral commons is not about preserving the past, but about supporting a viable future – one grounded in systems that cover vast areas of high-nature-value land worldwide and that contribute to productivity, sustainability, resilience, cultural dynamism and equitable land management. Therefore, let's tell this story out loud.



Pasture user group discussion, Mongolia @ M. Adbulaev

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