

Policy Brief on Pastoral Commonsⁱ

Pastoral commons are collectively governed landscapes where pastoralist communities sustainably govern land, livestock, mobility, livelihoods and cultural heritage through customary institutions with broad participation, shared knowledge and collective stewardship. These systems support biodiversity, ecosystem services, climate resilience and human well-being across a great portion of the planet, and their global importance is increasingly recognized. Yet they are threatened by the erosion of customary rights and knowledge, demographic decrease, global markets, competition for land and its appropriation, conflict, restrictive laws, and fragmentation. Safeguarding pastoral commons requires enforceable rights-based policy frameworks that protect and promote communal governance, mobile pastoral practices and the cultural traditions that sustain these resilient communal systems.

Calls to Action

- 1. Recognise, appropriately, the full range of customary rights of pastoral commons as defined by their custodian communities, including non-written or otherwise diverse forms of customary governance.** This requires legal recognition of self-determined rights and self-governance systems (see Italian Law No. 168/2017), *but enacted cautiously*, since formalisation also has the risk of weakening commons with homogenizing definitions that favour some structures and not others. States should avoid one-size-fits-all definitions of “pastoral commons”. All rights to steward and use natural resources — land use, mobility, grazing, hunting and decision-making — must be held by the members of the commons. Commons are not open-access regimes, since community-defined rules, oral or written, regulate use and transform conflict. The state must facilitate this self-governance, not substitute for it.
- 2. Secure legal, political and economic protection for pastoral commoners.** Provide dedicated legal services for pastoralists with fee waivers, including advice, representation, live translation, and ensure women and youth have access to them. Also support community mapping of territories, mobility corridors, water and other key resources, land rights and ceremonial sites, with consent-based safeguards for sensitive knowledge. Where communities give their [free, prior and informed consent](#), use these maps to protect pastoral [territories of life](#) and mobility corridors in spatial, development and economic plans — without confining mobility within rigid boundaries — and support their contribution to the [Global ICCA Registry](#), [LandMark](#) and national registries, feeding reporting under the [Convention on Biological Diversity](#). Protect and/or facilitate greater market access for diverse products from the pastoral commons.
- 3. Prevent land and resource grabbing, including nationalization or privatization of pastoral commons for agricultural conversion, extractive industries, unsustainable development initiatives, green washing or exclusionary conservation.** Restrict transactions, subsidies, loans and taxation measures that undermine customary collective tenure, and strengthen conflict redressal mechanisms. Any such measures must depend on ongoing pastoral commoning, carry free, prior and informed consent from all affected communities, generate fair long-term benefits, and make any loss of territorial access temporary and reversible. Refusal of consent must be as clearly available as consent. Violence against pastoral commons and the dispossession of their livelihoods violate internationally recognized [human rights](#).
- 4. Support pastoralists’ intergenerational transfers of knowledge and skill.** Encourage continuity of local language use, which transmits custodial knowledge of pastoral [territories of life](#). Support local value chains led by pastoralists, with particular focus on pastoralist women who hold much of the local traditional knowledge of animal rearing and dairy production and distribution. Invest in self-directed collective production, commit and promote the purchase of pastoral commons-derived products, and support the self-management of gathering spots such as ceremonial sites, fairs and key dry-season resources which are particularly crucial for the continuity of the commons. Favour livestock and ecosystem genetic diversity through local knowledge systems as it is an asset in unpredictable environments.
- 5. Facilitate solidarity networks within and between pastoral and transhumant groups and their community-designated representatives.** Support assemblies, conferences and self-organized dialogue spaces at local, regional, national and international levels with the participation of women, youth and elders. Provide resources for platforms for co-learning, facilitating conflict resolution and collective strategizing, offering recognition, certification and training.
- 6. Ensure that community-designated representatives can participate in the decision-making of governing and managing agencies at local, regional, national and international levels, including infrastructure planning.** Allocate resources and live translation for groups of varying size and scale to facilitate dialogue and decision-making

processes in accord with their groups' priorities. These processes must also assure the preservation of the different groups' self-governance of customary institutions and territorial rights, and public infrastructure development must be affordable, non-compulsory and free of important new debt burdens and externally imposed priorities.

7. Develop transboundary cooperation mechanisms for pastoral commons that span borders. Maintain community-driven joint agreements across geo-political borders so as to continue assuring the coherence of communal governance and therefore of landscape, ecosystem, species migration, and others alike. Use these agreements to support confidence building, pastoralist-led dialogue and rights protection, as historically integrated commons pierced by national boundaries often still function de facto across those boundaries, or can be revived for increased functionality.

8. Affirm that pastoral commons protect ecosystems of great value, that managed grazing is a maintenance process that preserves rangelands, that pastoral commons are not available to be repurposed, and that pastoralists' lives, livelihoods and [territories of life](#) must be protected. Rangelands store high quantities of carbon, most of it underground and protected from wildfires, while hosting an immense array of species that could not survive in other habitats. At the same time, the result of managed grazing cannot be substituted with fluctuating populations of wild ungulates, as the first directs the ecosystem toward greater levels of functionality and biodiversity. This is similar to how the effects of regular fire application by commoners and land stewards cannot be alternatively achieved by spontaneous wildfires. Pastoral commons support, and must continue to support, pastoralist communities.

9. Promote co-creation of knowledge by custodian pastoralist communities and research and education institutions. Research must follow community protocols, proceed only with free, prior and informed consent, share benefits, respect Indigenous and local knowledge, and be conducted in local languages. It must favor pastoralist co-leadership over study design, curriculum and educational narrative, it must increase opportunities for locals and address questions important to their territories. Research must seek as possible, to enable action in favour of pastoral commons.

10. Encourage temporary, revocable use by pastoralists of public or private abandoned and tenure-uncertain lands as commons-in-practice, enabling public services such as land maintenance and conservation while creating ecological corridors and connecting [working landscapes](#). This prevents irreversible transitions from grasslands to shrublands, and is especially needed in fast-transforming peri-urban areas crossed by pastoral corridors.

11. Recognize that real-time micronegotiations underpin mobility and livestock development practices. Protect pastoralists' rights to [create, moderate and co-lead these negotiations](#), and change policies that encourage settlement, hamper movement, or constrain livestock breeding. Instead of applying the terms "overgrazed" or "degraded" to pastoral commons, focus on removing external constraints placed on local governance, pastoral mobility, extensive pastoralism development, communitarian mechanisms for managing forage scarcity, or market access.

12. Enhance the public image of pastoral commons among decision-makers and society at large. Increase appreciation of the conservation outcomes, ecosystem services and social benefits pastoral commons provide, emphasising that the regular presence and large-scale communal stewardship of pastoralists are essential to wildfire prevention and conserving rangeland ecosystems, wildlife corridors, landscape beauty, agro-touristic development, unique gastronomies, high quality products, and irreplaceable experiences.

13. Prioritize community self-strengthening and bottom-up approaches in responding to all of the above. Safeguard collective decision-making authority and pastoralists' rights to develop their own localized processes of negotiation over mobility, biodiversity, self-governance, livestock genetics, water, seasonal forage reserves, fire and social ceremonies, and make infrastructure planning accountable to their stated preferences. Pastoral commons are sophisticated, living socio-ecological systems that sustain landscapes, livelihoods and cultures through generations. Where pastoralist communities retain secure rights, mobility and self-governance, they sustain biodiversity and resilient livelihoods across vast landscapes. What is needed are enforceable, rights-based approaches centred on community-led governance and tailored to pastoralism. Conservation must not dispossess, legal recognition must not impose uniformity, and development must not dismantle functioning systems of custodial stewardship. All should reinforce it.

¹ This Policy Brief was written by Tracy Burnett, Pau Sanosa-Cols, Francisco Godoy-Sepúlveda, Daniel Maghanjo Mwamidi, Santiago A. Parra, and Adrià Peña-Enguix, under the coordination of Pablo Domínguez, with particularly valuable contributions from the ICCA consortium pastoral group, as well as from members of the different Regional Chapters (especially Africa and Europe) of the International Association for the Study of the Commons (IASC), and from Caroline Upton and Nigel Dudley, along with other experts and civil society representatives from the Working Group on Pastoral Commons of the Global Alliance for Rangelands and Pastoralists, which is contributing support to the 2026 International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP). The Pastoral Commons Working Group aims to foster collaboration between pastoral rights holders, Indigenous Peoples, local communities, civil society organizations, researchers, and public agencies to contribute to turn knowledge and lived experience on pastoral commons into coordinated action. It does so by documenting their contributions, highlighting the value of the commons to strengthen governance, and supporting legal, policy, and market conditions at different scales, thus contributing to the IYRP 2026 and wider global efforts.