



UN called to do more to support the world's pastoralist peoples to help meet the Sustainable Development Goals

Highlights of a side event — *Sustainable pastoralism and rangelands: Impacts of COVID-19 and how not to leave them behind in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* — held at the United Nations High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development on 6 July 2021 and organized by the Government of Mongolia and the International Support Group for the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists (IYRP).

Ambassador Enkhbold Vorshilov, the Permanent Representative of Mongolia to the United Nations, opened the side event and called on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to bring innovative and integrated solutions for pastoralists and rangelands, which have largely been left behind.

Rangelands cover 54% of the Earth's landmass, stated *Iain Wright*, Deputy Director General of the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), drawing on a recently released [Rangeland Atlas](#) that has advanced knowledge of the full extent of rangelands. Rangelands are found in almost every country of the world and face common problems, said *William Payne*, Dean of the College of Agriculture, Biotechnology and Natural Resources at the University of Nevada at Reno, in the USA. Maintaining the integrity and productivity of the ecosystem goods and services that rangelands generate, he argued, is critical not only to the environment but also to the livelihoods of over half a billion people in over 100 countries worldwide. (For more information on this, watch this 2.5-minute [IYRP film](#) calling for the United Nations to designate an International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists at the September 2020 session of the Committee on Agriculture of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations).

An increasing number of environmental, socioeconomic and political threats jeopardize the integrity of rangelands and the security of rangeland livelihoods. Addressing just any one of these threats is insufficient. *Pradeep Kurukulasuriya*, who leads the Nature, Climate Change and Energy Team at the United Nations Development Programme, highlighted the need for integrated, inclusive solutions. Addressing all SDGs can benefit multiple crisis areas, including equitable development, climate change mitigation, and resilience to, and recovery from, pandemics and natural disasters.

Pastoralists are key to stewarding, conserving and sustainably managing rangelands. Most rangelands are not suited to crop production. *Anders Oskal*, Secretary General of the Association of World Reindeer Herders, highlighted the depth of knowledge of pastoralists, including more than 350 words for snow in the Sami language (SDG #16). *Pablo Frere*, the focal point of Pastoramericas (Latin American Alliance of Pastoralists) in the World Alliance of Mobile Indigenous Peoples (WAMIP), talked of autonomous solutions devised by pastoralists, such as nature-based livestock products (SDG #15) and increasing pastoral mobility as a resilience strategy (SDG #13), and called on governments to support them. *Baschirou Issa*, who is Technical Secretary for Africa for the Indigenous Peoples Major Group for Sustainable Development Goals, stressed the critical importance of securing land tenure for sustainable livelihoods and food security and of preventing injustice and conflicts (SDG #16). *Vibhabhai Saanga Rabari*, a pastoralist from Kutch, in Gujarat, India, speaking through translator *Natasha Maru*, a PhD student at the UK's Institute of Development Studies, talked of the importance of pastoralism for alleviating poverty not just among pastoralists but also among crop farmers who benefit from pastoral herds (SDG #1) and called for greater respect and recognition of pastoralist roles and value.

Pastoralism is a sustainable source of healthy meat and milk (SDG #12). Frere reported that in Argentina alone 35,000 pastoralist households generate USD300 million annually – a sizeable contribution to the nation’s GDP (SDG #8). Wright said that while 30 million of Africa’s pastoralists are classified as poor, most meat consumed in African countries comes from pastoralists on rangelands. Payne reported that the value of goods and services from rangelands globally can reach USD18.4 trillion annually (SDG #15). Better rangeland management will also reduce out-migration and help ensure gender equity, he said. *Sadia Musse Ahmed*, Country Representative of the Pastoral and Environmental Network in the Horn of Africa (PENHA) for Somaliland/Somalia, called for better recognition and empowerment of pastoralist women (SDG #5).

Payne reported that in the USA alone, grazing lands could potentially annually remove 198 million tons of the greenhouse gas carbon dioxide from the atmosphere (SDG #13). And Wright highlighted emerging scientific evidence that the potential for capturing carbon from rangelands could be higher than that from forests.

In many countries, public health services are difficult to reach for mobile and remote pastoralists (SDG #3), as pointed out by *Hussein Tadicha Wario*, Executive Director of the Center for Research and Development in Drylands (CRDD), in Kenya. He said that COVID-19-related restrictions on markets and on mobility to grazing areas have hurt pastoralist incomes and contributed to land degradation, even while the inherent resilience of pastoralist communities has helped them to cope with the pandemic. Wright argued that livestock as well as people must benefit from better health services in many countries – ideally through a combined “One Health” approach. And he pointed out that, contrary to perceptions in some media, pastoralism and livestock mobility have not been responsible for the spread of COVID-19.

Throughout history, pastoralists have faced environmental and socioeconomic unpredictability. In response, they have evolved ways to adapt, including by moving to find resources and remaining flexible, characteristics that continue to form the basis of their remarkable resilience. Climate change and disease pandemics add more pronounced flux and variability to rangeland ecosystems, said Wario, but the historical knowledge and resilience of pastoralist peoples and communities should continue to help them “build back better” following such shocks.

The future of pastoralism is in doubt in many countries because of the exodus of youth, as pointed out by the moderator of this side session, *Ilse Koehler-Rollefson*, a veterinarian with the League of Pastoral Peoples. Oskal and Rabari both explained how many in the younger generation are leaving this livelihood system but that more secure incomes from more support to sustainable livestock production systems would help to stem this out-migration. Sustainable pastoralism generates wealth at the cost of none, and to the benefit of all, they argued. Pastoralists should not be viewed as victims but rather as strong allies in addressing global challenges such as COVID-19 and climate change, concluded *Maryam Niamir-Fuller*, Vice Chair of the International Support Group for the IYRP.

Oskal, Frere and Wright all ended by stressing the importance of proclaiming 2026 “the International Year of Rangelands and Pastoralists”, an initiative that can help to raise awareness of these issues worldwide, fill knowledge gaps and spur actions to find more inclusive and integrated solutions for achieving the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

A video recording of this side event can be found on the [IYRP website](#).

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