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Multiple strategies for resilient livelihoods in communal areas of South Africa

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Abstract

Livestock farming in communal areas is an activity pursued by rural households as one of a range of livelihood strategies aimed at spreading risk. The cash and non-cash benefits derived from livestock, as well as the wide range of secondary resources harvested from communal rangelands, make an important contribution to livelihood diversification, and hence, resilience. Rural development policy should therefore not focus narrowly on commercialisation of livestock production in communal areas. Rather, it should take a multi-faceted approach to building livelihood resilience while providing pathways for households to escape poverty through enhancing the multiple benefits of livestock, adding value to secondary rangeland resources, and expanding the rural non-farm economy.

Introduction

In her position paper in this issue, Vetter (2013) makes a compelling argument for the need to realign policy on development and management of communal rangelands with the reality in South Africa. In this response paper, I focus on her call for policy that supports and enhances multiple livelihoods to build resilience and reduce risk for rural households. I start by expanding on Vetter's discussion of livelihood diversification as a risk-management strategy for the rural poor. I highlight the importance of the multiple livelihood benefits of livestock and secondary rangeland resources, in addition to off-farm incomes, as key dimensions of multiple livelihoods. I then consider the consequences of the narrow focus in policy on the commercialisation of livestock production in communal areas, expanding on Vetter's observations. I end with reflections on what I regard to be one of the biggest challenges that lie ahead in the pursuit of rural upliftment in the rangeland commons.

Livelihood diversification and resilience

Vetter (2013) rightly highlights the importance of livelihood diversification to enhance livelihood resilience. Pursuing multiple livelihood sources is a strategy to manage risk arising from variable or declining returns on livelihood activities (Devereux 1999, Barrett et al. 2001, Slater 2002, Ersado 2005, Fabusoro et al. 2010, Mutenje et al. 2010, Ekblom 2012). The greater the uncertainty of returns, the greater the vulnerability of the household's livelihood. By diversifying livelihood activities, households spread this risk and reduce their vulnerability. Livelihood diversification thus buffers households from uncertainty and increases their resilience to shocks (e.g. drought, loss of an income source, or sharp increase in food prices) and stresses (e.g. low income from a livelihood activity, shortages of land

and other natural resources, or poor market access), which are pervasive in rural areas (Reardon 1997, Slater 2002, Mutenje et al. 2010). Livelihood resilience underpins livelihood sustainability (Carney 1998).

The multiple roles of livestock in rural livelihoods

Vetter (2013) mentions the multiple benefits, both cash and non-cash, that rural households derive from livestock. This is important, because it contributes to livelihood diversification and hence, resilience. Diversification *within* a particular livelihood source, such as livestock farming, in addition to diversification *between* livelihood sources, has been identified as a strategy associated with more resilient livelihood trajectories (Sallu et al. 2010). Poorer households tend to rely on a greater range of benefits from their livestock than wealthier owners (Shackleton et al. 2001). However, the majority of owners derive little, if any, regular cash from livestock sales (Ainslie 2002, Ainslie 2005, Mapiye et al., 2009), and the direct-use values of products such as milk and meat exceed that of cash sales (Shackleton et al. 2005). The role of livestock as a form of savings and insurance, and hence as a safety-net, is also often overlooked, and yet is more important than as a source of regular income to most livestock owners in communal areas (Ainslie 2002, Ainslie 2005, Shackleton et al. 2005).

As Vetter (2013) mentions, some livelihood benefits from livestock, such as access to oxen for ploughing or products like milk, meat, and manure, extend beyond owners (Shackleton et al. 2005, Dovie et al. 2006). This contribution of livestock to the multiple livelihoods of non-owning households has not received enough attention in policy. However, there are also a *cost* to non-owning households, namely crop damage caused by livestock (Shackleton et al. 2005). Non-owners might receive compensation for crop damage from owners of the animals, but the cost of fencing to prevent such damage is borne solely by the non-owning household.

Secondary rangeland resources: “hidden capital”

Vetter (2013) draws attention to the importance of natural resources harvested from the rangeland commons as a livelihood safety-net for the rural poor. However, the contribution of these to diverse and resilient rural livelihoods could have been explored further, especially relative to that of livestock. By its very definition, *rangeland* refers to indigenous vegetation, comprising any of a number of plant growth forms, used primarily for foraging by livestock (Tainton 1999). Ironically, however, the uncultivated land in communal areas is typically used more extensively and intensively by rural households for purposes *other than* livestock. Cousins (1999) refers to these secondary resources on communal land as “hidden capital”.

These resources are used by rural households to provide for their domestic needs, to save money (e.g. the use of fuelwood instead of electricity), and to generate income through the sale of raw and processed natural products (Twine et al. 2003, Shackleton and Shackleton 2004, Babulo et al. 2008, Shackleton et al. 2008). The increased reliance on these resources by households in times of crisis, such as the death of a primary income earner, contributes to

their resilience (Shackleton and Shackleton 2004, Paumgarten 2005, Hunter et al. 2007, McGarry and Shackleton 2009).

The prevalence of the use of secondary resources is often much higher than the use of rangelands for livestock. For example, while 61% of households in Bushbuckridge (part of the former *Apartheid* homelands of Gazankulu and Lebowa in present day Mpumalanga Province, South Africa) own neither goats nor cattle (Shackleton et al. 2005), 94% use fuelwood (Madubansi and Shackleton 2007), 94% use *marula* fruit (Shackleton and Shackleton 2005), 92% use edible wild herbs (Shackleton et al. 1998) and 77% use edible insects (Hansen 1998) collected from the commons. The intensity of use of some of these resources is also high, such as fuelwood, which is used at a mean rate of 5.3 tonnes per household per year in rural South Africa (Shackleton and Shackleton 2004).

Across the developing world, income from secondary resources, in the form of cash, savings and provisioning, contributes an average of 22% of total household income in rural areas (Vedeld et al. 2007). This figure may be two or three-fold higher among poorer households (Babulo et al. 2008). Income from secondary resources typically makes a greater contribution to total household income than that from livestock sales and services, particularly among poorer households (Cavendish 2000, Babulo et al. 2008, Thondhlana et al. 2012). In Bushbuckridge, the direct use value of secondary savanna resources, averaged across all households (R2218) (Shackleton and Shackleton 2000), is 1.55 times that of livestock (R1431) (Shackleton et al. 2005). In the grasslands of Lesotho, the direct-use value of edible wild herbs alone is nearly six times that of household income from sales of livestock, wool and mohair, when averaged across all households (Letsela et al. 2002). The aggregate national direct-use value of harvested secondary resources in the former homelands of South Africa was estimated by Adams et al. (1999) to be R6.7 billion, compared to R2.9 billion for livestock production. These data put the value of secondary resources in multiple rural livelihoods into perspective, and highlight the extent to which the communal rangelands have historically been under-valued economically when assessed purely from a livestock perspective.

Although seldom the mainstay of households' livelihoods, additional cash income from trade in secondary resources is an important component of income diversification in communal areas (Shackleton et al. 2008). In fact, a greater number of households derive supplementary cash income from these resources than those from livestock (Letsela et al. 2002). Policy seeking to enhance income generating opportunities from commons should include improving support for the development of sustainable micro-enterprises that add value to appropriate local natural resources.

Urban commonages

While consideration of the role of communal grazing lands in household livelihoods is naturally centred on rural areas, mention also needs to be made of urban commonages. Vetter (2013) alludes to the use of municipal commonages in South Africa for livestock grazing by urban residents. These commonages, typically around smaller rural towns, also have a role to play in livelihood diversification and resilience. Most livestock farmers in

these systems are unemployed, with low levels of education (Atkinson 2007, Atkinson and Büsher 2006, Davenport and Gambiza 2009). The use of urban commonages for livestock thus enables poor, vulnerable urban households to diversify their livelihoods, and may buffer some from destitution (Atkinson and Büsher 2006). However, secondary resources, such as fuelwood and wild foods, are also harvested from these lands and may, in fact, make a greater contribution to the livelihoods of the urban users than livestock (Davenport et al. 2012).

Livelihood considerations of livestock commercialisation

Vetter (2013) is concerned that “*Promoting full-time commercial farming as the main model for developing livestock farming in the rangeland commons limits the range of livelihood options among poorer and emerging farmers and reduces their ability to cope with market instability, droughts, diseases, climate change and other risks*”. Her concern is well-founded. Commercialisation, as it is typically conceived, requires livelihood specialisation. To specialise in a livelihood activity, households need to have access to sufficient capital to pursue the activity *and* to serve as insurance against risk. This may be in the form of other income sources, ownership of savings or assets that can be liquidated quickly, or access to external forms of insurance such as low-interest loans, subsidies or grants. It may also include better access to markets, information and expertise needed for more profitable farming. It is thus typically the wealthier, more powerful, less vulnerable households that are able to specialise in livestock farming or at least own large herds (Sallu et al. 2010). Such households are the minority in communal areas. In fact, livestock ownership in communal areas is usually an important *risk-averse* livelihood strategy that contributes to resilience, rather than a primary economic activity (Ainslie 2005).

Policy and interventions seeking to encourage rural households to specialise in livestock farming must pay sufficient attention to the ability of households to manage risk and absorb shocks. Failing to do so could inadvertently erode the resilience of households, and hence increase their vulnerability. Rural households diversify their livelihoods for a reason, and this needs to be adequately understood and accommodated by policy seeking to support emergent farmers. Furthermore, the multiple contributions of livestock to rural livelihoods, some cash-based and some not, calls into question the mutually exclusive distinction between “subsistence” and “commercial” livestock farming in policy (Shackleton et al. 2001). Innovation is needed in order to find new ways to enhance these multiple livelihood values in ways that do not erode resilience.

Vetter (2013) also rightly cautions about the potentially dire implications of the emergence of a few successful commercial farmers in communal areas for the livelihoods of the majority of rural households. Commercialisation may result in most households losing access to common property resources, especially if the commons were to be privatised. This would result in the loss of this crucial component of the diverse livelihoods of the rural poor, along with its safety-net function. The per capita consumption and direct-use values of key secondary resources is higher among poorer households (Twine et al. 2003, Shackleton and Shackleton 2006), and the loss of access to these resources would thus leave the poor substantially worse off and more vulnerable. This could reinforce existing inequities in rural

areas since households able to successfully specialise in farming are more likely to be among the wealthy and powerful local elite.

A point not made forcefully enough by Vetter (2013) is that the emphasis on livestock commercialisation is based on the premise that communal areas are unproductive (Shackleton et al. 2001). The problem with this common view is that the value of livestock in communal lands has typically been assessed from a commercial production perspective. This ignores the value of multiple livelihood benefits from livestock (Ainslie 2002), underestimating their economic value by up to 75% (Shackleton et al. 2000). Furthermore, economic assessments of the commons have largely ignored the substantial environmental income derived by rural households from the secondary natural resources in these landscapes (Cavendish 2000, Shackleton and Shackleton 2000). This is a policy blind-spot.

Conclusion

In the conclusion of her paper, Vetter (2013) states that “... *agriculture on its own, let alone livestock production, is unable to solve the problems of rural poverty, and rangeland development needs to be part of a multi-sectoral approach including other economic and subsistence activities, and which facilitates rural-urban linkages.*” This is the crux of the matter. Supporting successful emerging livestock farmers on communal land should be a component of any rural development strategy, but it will never be the solution for the majority of the rural poor. Rigg (2006) puts it well when he says that “*The best means of promoting pro-poor growth in the countryside may have less to do with supporting small-holder farming, whether through land redistribution or policies of agricultural development, and more to do with endowing poor people with the skills so that they can escape from farming and, perhaps, escape from the countryside.*”

The contribution of secondary rangeland resources and off-farm incomes need to be enhanced as components of diverse, resilient livelihoods, complementary to the range of livelihood benefits derived from livestock. Examples of possible interventions exist, but they are not without their challenges. Although the commercialisation of secondary resources in the commons provides livelihood security for many households, it is unlikely to provide a pathway out of poverty for more than a few (Sunderlin et al. 2005, Shackleton et al. 2008). The payment for ecosystem services, including for carbon credits, watershed protection, and biodiversity protection, holds much promise. However, substantial impediments such as insecure tenure rights, ineffective local institutions, poor access to international markets, and economies of scale, need to be overcome for this potential to be realised (Sunderlin et al. 2005, Blignaut and Mollman 2006, Milder et al. 2010). Greater attention also needs to be given to expanding the rural non-farm economy, but this requires substantial investment in developing rural infrastructure and human capital, nurturing local sectors like tourism or mining, and improving physical and economic linkages between rural and urban areas (Haggblade et al. 2010). The challenge therefore remains to find ways of sustainably transforming current rural “safety-nets” that enable poor households to cope, into “cargo-nets” that provide ways for greater numbers of rural households to climb out of poverty.

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