

United Nations Integrated Regional Information Networks (IRIN) report on the Global Pastoralist Gathering:

ETHIOPIA: Pastoralists lament loss of grazing land

TURMI, 2/16/2005 (IRIN) - Daniel Shngade, a tall, lean man, laments the continued loss of his forefathers' land. An elder from the pastoralist Barabaig ethnic group of northern Tanzania, he says their traditional grazing lands have been gradually sold off for cultivation to businesses.

His concerns, echoed by the 120 pastoral leaders meeting earlier this month in a remote corner of Ethiopia, also touched on legal rights, access to education and health issues as well as the chance of economic gains for his people.

"Either we change our lifestyle or disappear forever because more and more of our lands are being stolen," the 54-year-old father of 18 children, said. The Barabaig, who number around 800,000 and are famed for their rain dance, could soon disappear, he added.

Waiting for his turn to address over 100 government officials from both developed and developing countries, he told IRIN that land loss was fuelling conflict between ethnic groups.

Large gathering

The meeting was unprecedented. It was the largest global gathering of pastoralists to have taken place, according to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, which organised the event.

The five-day gathering in Turmi, close to the Kenyan border and on the sacred ground of the Hamar people, brought together government officials, pastoral leaders and development organisations to try and plot a new vision for pastoralists.

At the forefront of everyone's mind was how the 2015 international anti-poverty targets - the Millennium Development Goals - would be met with continued isolation of millions of pastoralists around the world.

Pastoralism is an ancient mode of mobile livestock production because of the harsh environments that pastoralists live in and their need to keep moving between seasons for better grazing areas. Often they travel hundreds of kilometres with their animals.

The pastoralists are one of the most marginalised groups, often inhabiting inhospitable lowland areas where they have little access to health, education and transport facilities. In Ethiopia, pastoralists are seven times less likely than most Ethiopians to attend school.

Severe land degradation, by agriculturalists, often undermines their very existence and threatens their crucial dry season lands - that to the untrained eye look empty and abandoned.

The pastoral crisis was summoned up in a one-page statement released at the end of the summit on 3 February. It said herders worldwide were rapidly losing their land, the chance of proper education and health care.

"Unless change comes, by 2015 access to education, health care, clean water, economic progress and legal protection will have declined in pastoral areas," the pastoral leaders declared. "Not only will pastoral people and their animals suffer, but the environment in which they live will have degraded and the markets which they serve will have declined."

Countries attending the forum included Ethiopia, Mali, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Tajikistan, Syria, Argentina, Peru, Spain, Switzerland and the UK. It is estimated that there are more than 50 million pastoralists in sub-Saharan Africa and up to eight million in Ethiopia, representing 20 different ethnic groups.

Often marginalised

Often they are erroneously viewed as "backward" with little to offer the modern world, said experts like Jeremy Swift, a leading authority on pastoralism, from the UK Institute of Development Studies in Sussex.

"It would be unthinkable from a moral position and it would be extremely stupid to marginalise an entire people," Swift told IRIN at Turmi. "This is a stupid policy - it is also an uneconomic policy and it is also an immoral policy."

He added: "Pastoralists can be part of a modern economy." He argued that herders and nomads often conserve land better and have higher meat and milk production levels from their animals than western dairy and meat industries.

"The resources they use often have very little alternative use to raise livestock," he added. "They are very good managers of land and the best future for wildlife conservation in Africa is in conjunction with pastoralists, not throwing them off the land."