



Tropentag, September 14-16, 2010, Zurich

“World Food System —
A Contribution from Europe”

Living off Uncertainty

SAVERIO KRÄTLI¹, NIKOLAUS SCHAREIKA²

¹*IUAES Commission on Nomadic Peoples, United Kingdom*

²*University of Göttingen, Anthropology, Germany*

Abstract

In this paper we argue that specialist dryland pastoralists produce by exploiting non-uniform distribution, in the form of what we call the ‘intelligent’ harvesting of unstable concentrations of nutrients on the range. Recent research in complex dynamics questions the utility of analytical tools based on average values when dealing with conditions of unpredictable variability. On the other hand, average values and models of standard statistics are fundamental to all dimensions of pastoral development, from natural resource management to service provision and conventional models of animal production. Production in drylands pastoralism might therefore be at odds with the most basic items in the tool bags of both pastoral development planners and policy makers.

In spite of decisive advances made by the ‘new range ecology’, drylands pastoralism is still looked upon as a coping strategy that allows herders to get along with an ‘inadequate’ resource base. This stance can be traced to a long-established approach in the disciplines that inform pastoral development planning (natural resource management, range ecology, animal science) to rely on analytical tools based on standard statistics and average measures. However, pastoralism is better understood as a *sui generis* production system exploiting unstable concentrations of nutrients (asymmetric distribution: the most reliable feature of drylands environments); a system geared at maximising economic value, while stabilising its performance in environments where ‘uncertainty’ is harnessed for production. Since average values and standard statistics fail to capture asymmetric distribution (precisely what is relied upon for production in drylands pastoralism) they should not uniquely or uncritically inform pastoral development planning.

We are not suggesting that pastoral development planners and policy makers should (or could) stop using average values and standard statistics. However, the risk of misrepresentation following from the use of such inappropriate tools is potentially very costly. For once, because they build into any pastoral development analysis the implication that agricultural production systems must rely upon stability and uniformity. To the extent to which pastoralism does not (because instead it exploits asymmetric distribution), pastoralists are implicitly excluded from the category of producers by the analytical framework that supposedly targets them for development interventions.

Keywords: Asymmetric distribution, complex dynamics, feeding selectivity, high reliability, new range ecology, non-equilibrium, pastoral development, woDaaBe