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Navigating uncertainties: In what directions are Fulani pastoralists going nowadays in Benin?

GEORGES DJOHY, H. STOWE AGBÉSSI

University of Parakou, National School of Statistics, Planning and Demography (ENSPD), Benin

Abstract

West African pastoralists are more than ever subject to climatic, socio-economic, political and security-related uncertainties that increase their vulnerability and marginalisation. Studies have shown that, when facing shocks and stresses, pastoralists – depending on their level of access to resources and markets – embrace at least three livelihood trajectories: “moving up”, i.e. maintaining their pastoral life and strengthening their pastoral economy by increasing their herds; “moving out”, i.e. maintaining a foothold in pastoralism while seeking complementary or alternative sources of livelihood to avoid poverty; and “moving away”, i.e. exiting pastoralism and relying fully on other sources of income. This study analysed how Fulani pastoralists in northern Benin negotiated options in a context of multidimensional uncertainty recently aggravated by the Covid-19 pandemic and Sahel-rooted terrorist insecurity. A mixed-methods approach was used to collect data from 419 Fulani (280 men and 139 women) aged 15 years and over in three districts in northern Benin, namely Tchaourou, Parakou and Kandi. Results revealed that diversification of livelihood activities is an important survival strategy among the Fulani pastoralists (58 %), with an average of two activities per multi-active person. While men are more involved in livestock (37.50 %), trade (24.64 %) and crop farming (21.43 %), women are more active in petty trade (42.45 %) and crafts (37.41 %). Hierarchical cluster analysis revealed three pastoralist clusters: Cluster 1 (40.81 %), composed essentially of women practising only one activity, either handicrafts or petty trade; Cluster 2 (34.84 %), made up of men who have livestock keeping as their main activity and crop farming or trade as a secondary activity; and Cluster 3 (24.34 %), made up of men who practise only one activity, either in trade or administrative or private-sector work. In sum, two major trends have emerged in pastoralism in northern Benin: exiting from traditional pastoralism (moving away, i.e. Clusters 1 and 3) and diversifying and seeking added value (moving out, i.e. Cluster 2). There were no cases of “moving up” identified. These findings show that pastoralism has changed a lot in Benin and that it is important to take this into account in current government policies.

Keywords: Livelihood diversification, livelihood trajectories, pastoralists