



Tropentag, September 10-12, 2025, hybrid conference

“Reconcile land system changes  
with planetary health”

## Beyond the market: understanding herd off-take dynamics among himba pastoralists

LILLI SCHEITERLE<sup>1</sup>, KATEURU TJUANA<sup>2</sup>, MWALA LUBINDA<sup>3</sup>, BRIGITTE KAUFMANN<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL), Germany*

<sup>2</sup>*Namibia University of Science and Technology, Department of Agricultural Sciences and Agribusiness,*

<sup>3</sup>*Namibia University of Science and Technology, Department of Agricultural Sciences and Agribusiness,*

<sup>4</sup>*German Institute for Tropical and Subtropical Agriculture (DITSL), Germany*

### Abstract

The pastoralist communities of Northern Kunene depend heavily on livestock for their livelihoods, with cattle off-take being a main source of household income. Himba pastoralists are often criticised for low commercial herd off-take interpreted as “irrational” behaviour from a production- and market-oriented perspective.

In studies of herd productivity, most research has focused on commercial off-take, often overlooking non-commercial off-take and herd losses due to their presumed limited relevance to household welfare. This study aims to elucidate the patterns of off-take among pastoralists in Northern Kunene by considering the interplay between environmental determinants and the socio-cultural rationales underpinning livestock sales.

Data were collected between January 2023 and April 2024 using a mixed-methods approach. Long-term data were collected on intended (commercial and non-commercial) and unintended off-take, in three monthly intervals with 48 herd owners, resulting in 288 completed off-take fact sheets. This was complemented by in-depth qualitative interviews and participant observation.

Intended commercial off-take is shaped not only by the number of cattle owned but also by competing needs, including non-commercial demands (e.g., cultural, ritual, bridewealth, or community obligations), and losses due to environmental disturbances (e.g., drought, disease, wildlife), as well as alternative income sources. Herd stability, i.e. maintenance of the asset base, is a critical concern: the sustainability of cattle herds underpins community resilience in the face of environmental stressors and socio-economic hardships. Maintaining herd stability requires a careful balance between off-take, reproductive performance, and ecological pressures, while also preserving social and cultural capital. As factors constraining production and off-take, respondents highlighted infrastructural gaps, including limited veterinary services, poor access to drugs, and vaccination campaigns that rarely reach remote areas. Inadequate market access and unfair pricing by itinerant traders further constrain commercialisation. Although formal markets offer better prices, high transport costs make them inaccessible. Pastoralists emphasised that addressing these constraints would improve livelihoods and enable more market-oriented engagement.

What may appear to outsiders as “hoarding” is, in fact, a rational strategy embedded in the socio-ecological and cultural realities of pastoral life in Northern Kunene. This research offers policy-relevant insights into strategies for enhancing welfare and resilience of pastoral households.

**Keywords:** Herd off-take, livelihood strategies, Namibia, Northern Kunene, pastoralism, socio-ecological resilience