

# Beyond the market: Understanding herd off-take dynamics among Himba pastoralists

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## Introduction

- Livestock husbandry sustains Himba semi-nomadic livelihoods in Northern Kunene
- Low commercial off-take often misinterpreted as irrational
- Intended off-take: cattle removed for **commercial** means (sales) or **non-commercial** means (e.g., rituals, gifts, loans, sacrifices)
- Unintended off-take: cattle **losses** (e.g., disease, predation, theft or injury)
- Non-commercial off-take and herd losses largely overlooked in research
- Aim is to identify the determinants of commercial cattle off-take

## Results

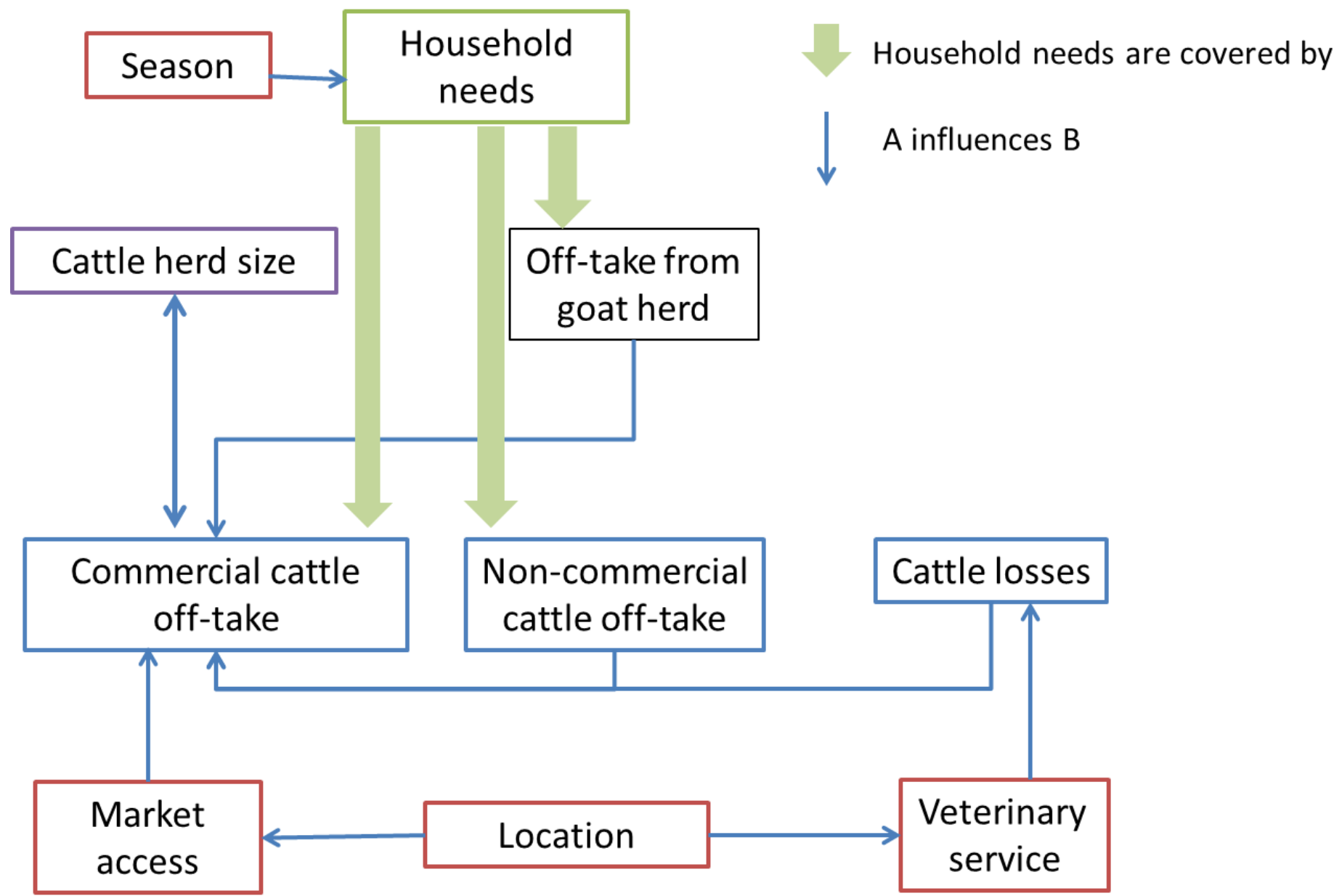


Figure 1: Conceptual framework of the study

Between the 12-month period (2023 – 2024)  
77% households (n=46) reported commercial cattle off-take  
55% (n=33) engaged in non-commercial off-take  
68% (n=41) experienced cattle losses

### Reasons for commercial and non-commercial off-take

#### Reasons for **commercial** off-take

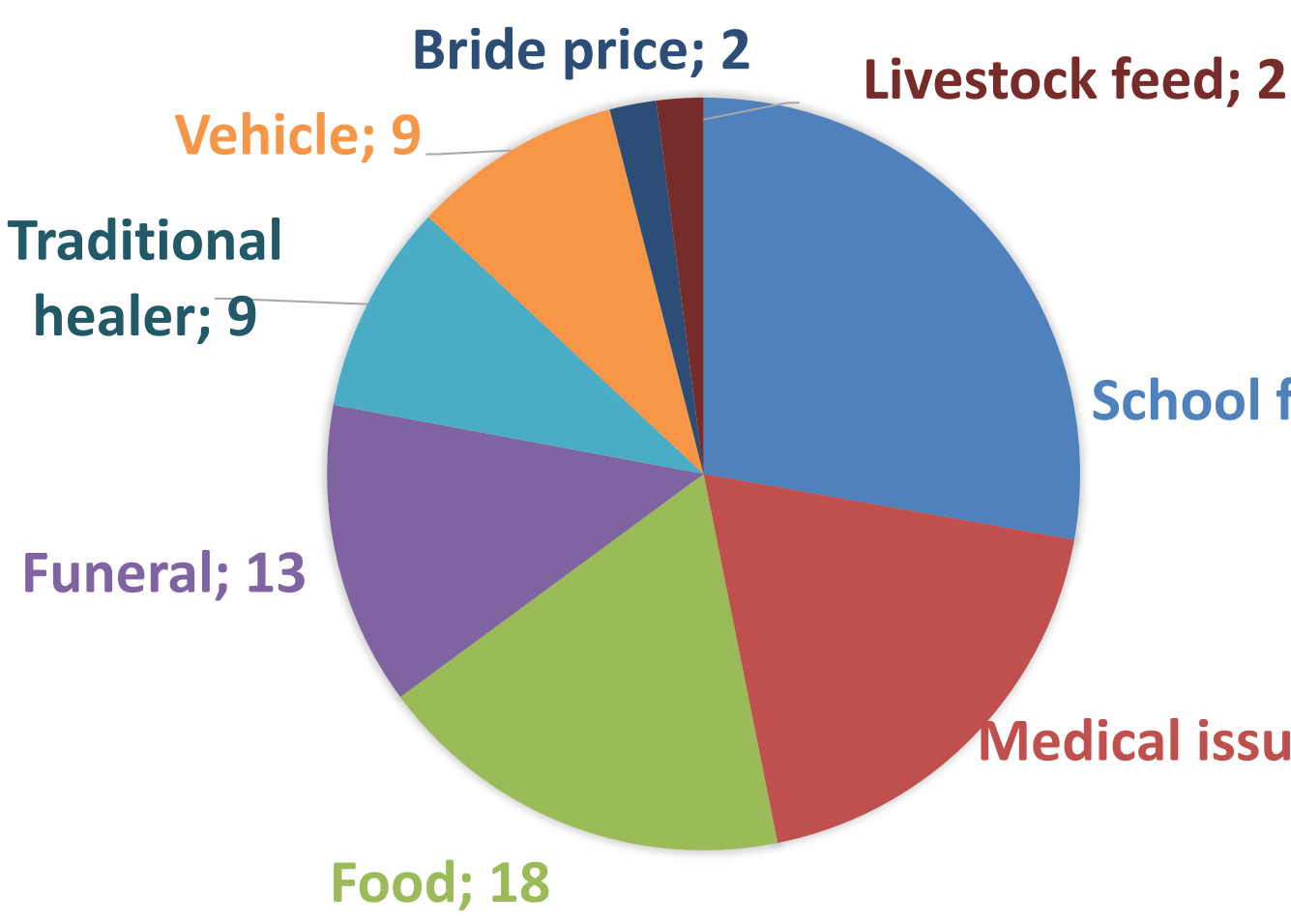


Figure 3: Men restraining a cow for slaughter

- Off-take driven by urgent cash needs; livestock serve as a capital asset
- Funeral costs (cash) reflect the importance of social obligations

#### Reasons for **non-commercial** off-take

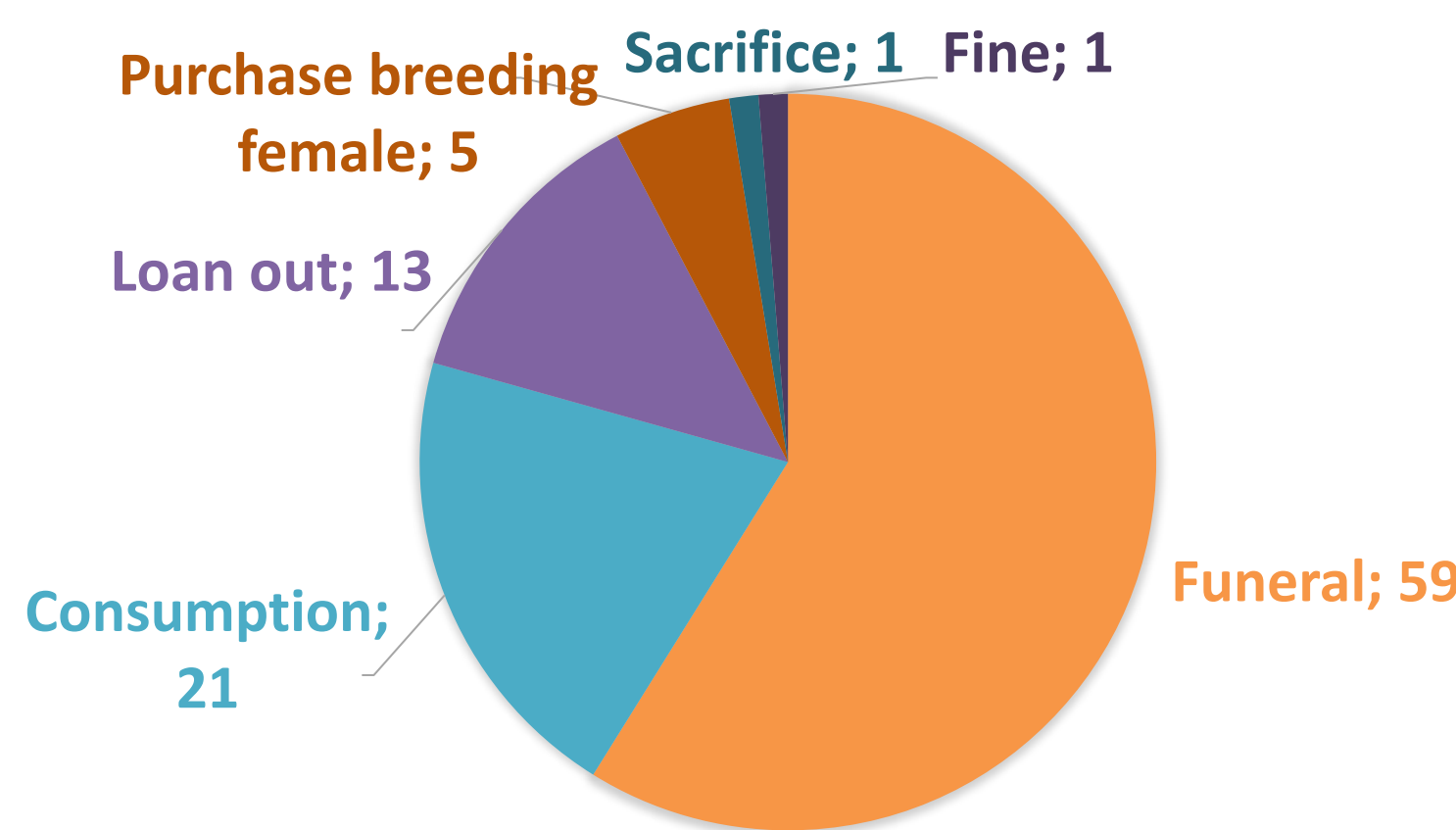


Figure 4: Himba graveyard: cattle skulls as symbols of power, respect, and wealth

- Funeral rituals: cattle slaughtered, sometimes consumed, but often left for scavengers as part of ritual observance
- Cattle loans: offspring (and milk) kept by borrower (e.g., initiation rites, hardship, support to young herders), original animal later returned

## Conclusions

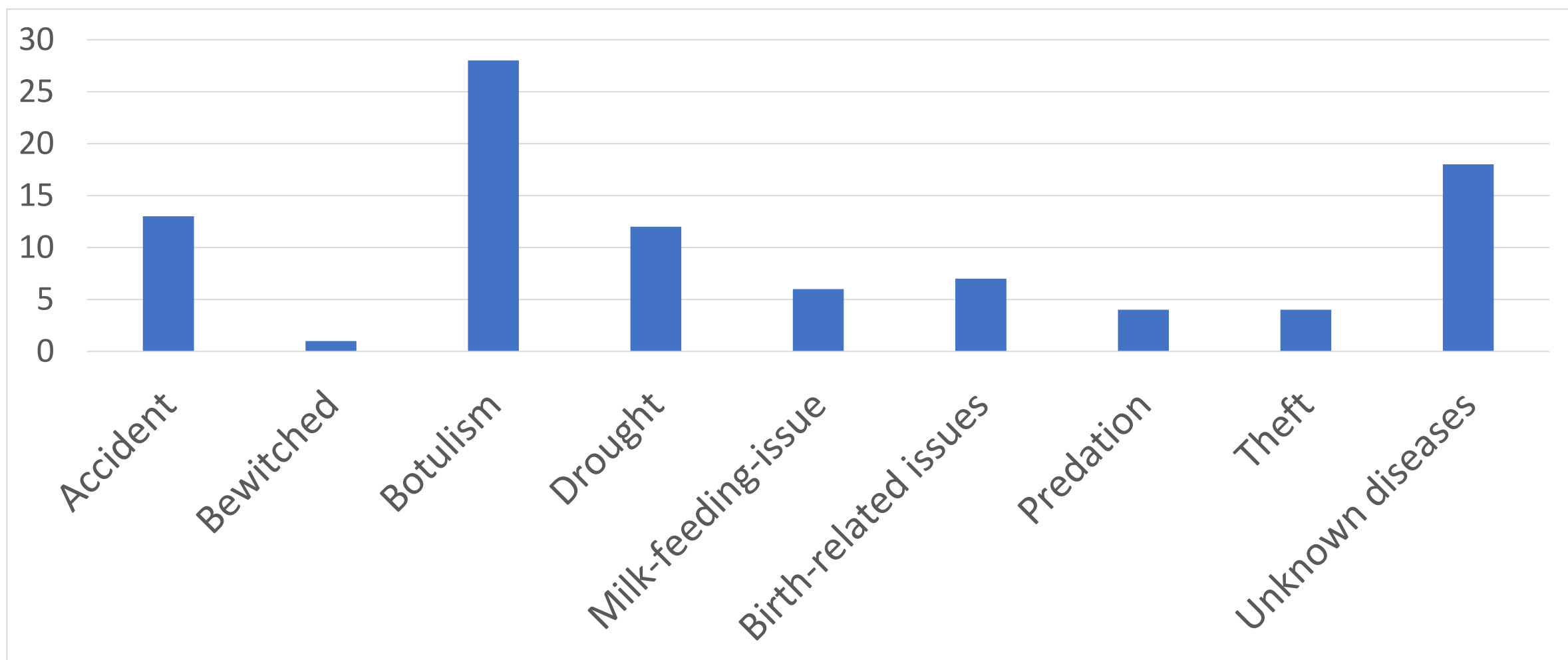
- Commercial off-take is shaped by:
  - Economic distress (not price)
  - Social obligations, cultural norms, and ceremonial needs: practices reinforce kinship ties and resource sharing
  - Infrastructure: access to markets, other than traders, and veterinary services

### Recommendations

- Veterinary: services need to be realigned with actual disease burdens
- Integrated policies needed: improve infrastructure while recognizing cultural dimensions

### Causes of cattle losses

Table 1: Causes of cattle losses mentioned by livestock keepers (n= 94 cattle losses)



- Health-related causes (≈54%)—driven by weak veterinary infrastructure, and lack of timely animal health support
- Botulism is the most common cause of cattle mortality

### Factors affecting commercial off-take

Table 2: Coefficient estimates from OLS regression determining commercial off-take (n=60)

Adj R-squared	0.4393
Variables	Coef. (SD)
Age household head	0.006 (0.005)
Ln_N goats sold	0.154* (0.083)
Ln_N cattle non-commercial off-take	0.040 (0.115)
Ln_N cattle losses	0.080 (0.127)
Price dissatisfaction (dummy)	0.473*** (0.089)
Otjakati – Site 1	0.507** (0.251)
Etanga – Site 2	0.028 (0.245)
Etoto – Site 3	0.000
Omuhonga – Site 4	0.255 (0.218)
Epupa –Site 5	0.205 (0.258)

Note: \*\*\*, \*\*, \* indicate significance at the 1%, 5%, and 10% levels, respectively

#### Market:

“I was not happy at all. I sold them because there wasn't anything I could do” (ID5S1)

#### Veterinary service:

“We buried many animals without knowing the cause; it is painful because we cannot prevent it next time” (ID5S3)



Figure 5: Himba herders

- Households dissatisfied with prices had ~47% higher commercial off-take, reflecting distress sales, indicating that economic urgency overrides price satisfaction
- Location effect: Otjakati had ~50% higher off-take than Etoto; proximity to markets (35 km) improves access to sales and veterinary support
- Non-commercial off-take and losses do not influence sales; households still sell to recover income



Figure 6: Young herder with cattle herd at the homestead

## Study Area

- Epupa Constituency, Kunene North Region, Namibia
- Annual rainfall: 50 to 400 mm
- Unimodal rainfall pattern, typically, January to March
- Home to Himba pastoralists
- Livelihood and economy are based on cattle

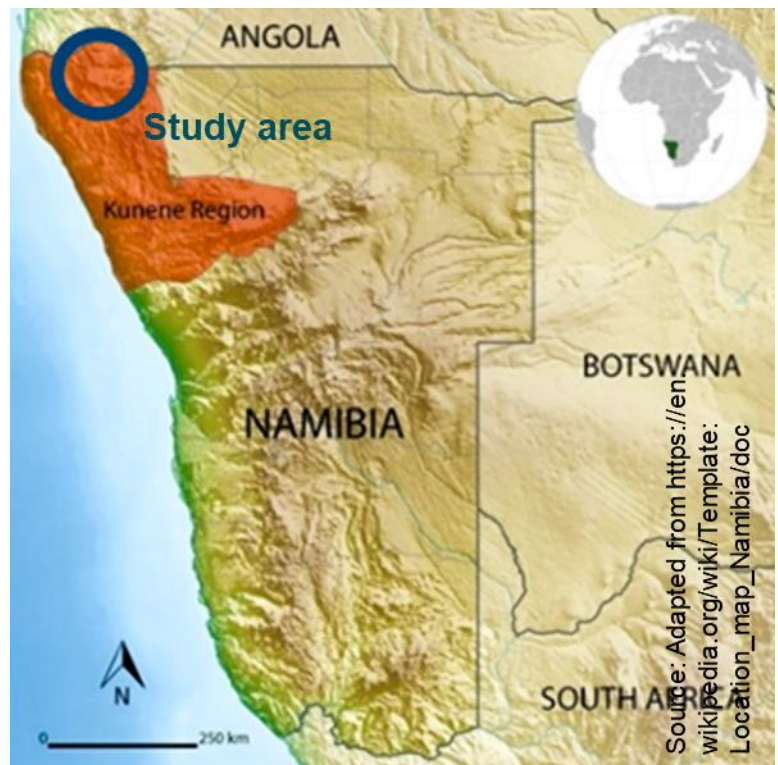


Figure 2: Study region

## Methods

Longitudinal study with interviews conducted between Jan 2023 – May 2024

- Participant observations
- 60 structured questionnaires (12 households/site × 5 sites)
- 42 key informant interviews with experienced herders
- 230 fact-sheets administered every 3 months over 1 year to the 12 households - coverage varied due to pastoralist mobility -



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### Acknowledgements:

We want to thank the pastoralists from all study sites in the Epupa constituency for their participation. Wilhelmina Nuule and Seth Kaimunine for their assistance and insights, Lea Ludwig and Christian Hülsebusch for the visual representation, and the DFG for funding