

# Viewpoint: “Professionalism in Subsaharan Livestock Rangeland” Development

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I have just come back from more than a year in Zimbabwe. That experience convinces me we need to rethink the foundations of the livestock rangeland profession as it operates in many parts of Eastern and Southern Africa.

**There are three cornerstones to our profession.** Each is a corner into which livestock rangeland specialists have boxed themselves.

First we subscribe to the needs assessment approach. The aim is identify the primary needs, limiting factors, and constraints on stock, grassland or herder production—be they physical, legal, policy or bureaucratic—and then to meet or remove them.

The second is our objective in meeting these needs: We always seek to ensure that the resource is improved or at least maintained. If we are range ecologists, it's range condition we want bettered; if animal productionists, improved cattle condition is the goal, be it for enhanced beef, draft power, milk or whatever. If we are political scientists or rural sociologists, our aim is to improve the livelihood condition of livestock holders, in particular, to reduce the highly skewed distribution of income, assets, and cattleholdings in rural areas.

The third cornerstone follows from and complements the other two. If livestock rangeland specialists are unable to meet the needs they identify, and even if they never improve range, livestock or livelihood condition, at least no further harm should be done to the natural resource base. Whatever we do as professionals, we must, in short, not increase overgrazing.

**Each cornerstone has become a deadweight** around the neck of our professionalism.

The problem with the needs assessment approach is that *so much needs to be done* in Subsaharan livestock rangeland development. The objectives of livestock rangeland projects need to be made less conflicting, constraints need to be made fewer and less compelling, project design assumptions need to be less ill-informed, criteria for evaluating projects need to be less at odds with each other, and there need to be many fewer unintended consequences associated with livestock rangeland projects. If that weren't bad enough, new needs loom on the horizon as the multiple disciplines involved in livestock rangeland development—economics, animal science, anthropology and others—evolve, debate, and advance their own methods. The corner livestock rangeland specialists have boxed themselves into is, in brief, this: *We are experts*

*in identifying needs, but since so much needs to be done, how can our advice ever work?*

As for the profession's objectives, they may be good, but can the same be said for the means to achieve them? If the only way range condition is demonstrably improved for the better is to have a drought kill off all the livestock, then the objective of having improved range is not worth the cost of impoverishing rural households in the process. If the only way to reduce the skewed distribution is to let the cattle of the poor die in a drought rather than having them sold to the rich as distress sales (thereby increasing the skew), then the objective of a more equal distribution is not worth the cost of impoverishing rural households. And if the only way to “increase” agricultural investment and offtake is to have AIDS kill off the herder population aged 31–45 who have statistically lower than average offtake and investment rates, then again the objective is not worth the cost. The corner livestock rangeland specialists have boxed themselves into is, in brief, this: *We can't be against improving cattle or range or livelihood condition, yet there are few proven ways to do this, and those that do work are too horrible to contemplate.*

Finally, far too many in the profession are obsessed with overgrazing, and I mean quite literally in the clinical sense of a complete lack of perspective. How many irrigation and drainage specialists are as fixated on salinization as is the average Subsaharan livestock rangeland specialist on overgrazing? How many livestock rangeland specialists have said, “Overgrazing is a fact of life, an inherent cost of livestock rangeland production. If you don't believe me, look at how many overgrazed and overstocked commercial ranches there are!” The corner livestock rangeland specialists have boxed themselves into is, in brief, this: *As professionals we must be against overgrazing—it is our last refuge after having failed to meet needs and improve conditions—but we have no effective way of stopping overgrazing, even under so-called “best management practices”.*

Yet if as professionals we aren't for meeting the needs we identify, or for attaining the objectives we have, or for stopping overgrazing, then what do we have left as professionals to do, to advise? Where is our professionalism?

**Allow me to summarize my answer.** Livestock rangeland specialist should be doing much more of what some of them have been doing in the past. Instead of experts in assessing needs, we should be expert in the feasible, that is, what can be done with the budgets we have rather than what needs to be done with the budgets we want. Instead

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of having the objectives of improving range, livestock or herder condition, we should be operating according to the principle that objectives are always contingent on the environment, and the environment is heterogeneous in the extreme in Subsaharan Africa. Goals that make sense in one place and at one time should not be expected to make sense there later or anywhere else for that matter. Lastly, instead of considering overgrazing everywhere taboo, we should be judging each case of environmental use or abuse on its own merits. Livestock rangeland development is, in other words, an art, not because it is without science or principles, but because it starts with the situation first, and then adapts its principles to that situation.

**The priority task of this new professionalism** must be to attack the obsession with overgrazing. Here too the cure will have to be case-by-case. The example of Zimbabwe helps us to see how.

If you were to take an introductory course on "Africa's Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (ASALs)," its first lecture would begin something like this:

Two basic problems afflict the ASALs: low rainfall and low human population. With slight and unpredictable rainfall come poor crops, extensive livestock production and erratic water supplies. With sparse human population come the tremendous obstacles in realizing the spectrum of rural development, including market economies of scale, centralized provision of government services, increased participation of local people in government decisionmaking, and expanded local resource management by people in the absence of government...

You would then expect Zimbabwe, with an average 25 persons per square kilometer or more in ASALs, to be in a better position to solve this problem of too few people over too much land. Not so. The experts are all but unanimous in their view that more people mean more problems in Zimbabwe's arid and semi-arid lands.

Thus we come to the central link routinely forged in Subsaharan livestock rangeland development: Areas are

always overcrowded when they are not underpopulated. Population pressure is invariably too low or too high there, with nothing in between. When was the last time you heard someone conclude of *any* Subsaharan locality, "You know, they have the right number of people and mix of livestock there"?

**This routine thinking has to stop.** People who believe that just because an area is overgrazed it must be overpopulated have to tell us at what estimated levels of human population pressure the area should be before government services can be cost-effectively provided, economies of scale in production and marketing realized, and participatory management of local village resources optimized there. Otherwise, how can residents in these areas be expected to come up with solutions to the overgrazing problem, if they do not have some government infrastructure or markets or participatory decisionmaking to rely on? In the absence of such estimates, criticisms about high population pressure (be it human or livestock) leading to overutilization of the range have *zero*—I repeat, *zero*—policy relevance.

What livestock rangeland professionals should offer the livestock holders of Subsaharan Africa is not fear and loathing of overgrazing, but rather this: We think *with* them, not for or against or in spite of them. We accept livestock holders on their own terms. The fact that people, millions of them, live in Africa's dry zones is justification enough for livestock rangeland improvements. If herders say range deterioration is caused by lack of rainfall, not overstocking—a survey finding from across Africa—then it is up to us professionals to show how this could be true, not to tell them they're wrong. Even if it were found—it won't be—that stocking rates always exceed "a really existing" carrying capacity and that herders are not rational and that they can never be commercialized, this should not matter in the least to our livestock rangeland professionalism. We take herders as they are and have something to say to them for improving their many different situations, case-by-case.