**Case Study 7. The Kuchi pastoralists of Afghanistan**[[1]](#footnote-1)

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| **Abstract**  The Afghan Kuchi are a pastoral people whose stock graze highland pastures in the summer and move to the lowlands in the bitter winter. Because of increasing hardship of the lifestyle imposed by drought, the ongoing insurgency and squabbles with the sedentary Hazara over land use, many have exchanged their nomadic/ transhumant ways for a settled lifestyle on the fringes of urban areas, or in refugee camps. The Kuchi in pastoral mode are well-adapted to their lifestyle, more resilient than in sedentary mode. Some 25 per cent of the 1.5 million Kuchi in Afghanistan are food insecure. The government and some international organizations are working with Kuchi leaders to plan the way ahead, enabling the Kuchi to retain their pastoral lifestyle but with access to modern amenities. |

Key words: nomadic, transhumance or semi-migratory; livestock economic system; resilience and adaptability; drought and insurgency; risk management and preparedness; refugee camps; casual labor; community-based natural resource management

7.1. Introduction:

The population of Afghanistan is estimated to be around 25 million. Some 74 percent (around 18.5m people) live in rural areas, 20 percent (5.0m) in urban areas, and 6 percent are classified as nomadic Kuchi. Some 2.3 million out of 3.4 million Afghan households (68 percent) have livestock, indicating the importance of this sector within agriculture, the export of livestock products once being a major contributor to GNP.

The backbone of the livestock industry of Afghanistan is based upon two traditional production and management systems, both of which are practised at little more than subsistence level. One of these is a mixed farming system conducted by sedentary farmers, the large majority (79 percent) raising some type of livestock. Small numbers of cattle, sheep and goats are integrated within a largely cereal/horticultural crop production system, and the products used largely for household consumption. The other system, practised by the nomadic Kuchi, is based almost exclusively on livestock production and migration within fragile, arid and often sparsely-vegetated environments. 94 percent of Kuchi households own some livestock. In this system, income from sale of animals and animal products has been the main livelihood, involving a seasonal rotation of sheep and goat flocks between summer and winter grazing pastures.

Kuchi is a term generally used to describe the transhumant or nomadic pastoralists of Afghanistan. Yet it is a term that may cause confusion, since it describes not just one thing, but three - a migratory lifestyle, a livestock-dependent production mode and a cultural identity.[[2]](#footnote-2) The pastoral livestock production mode traditionally employed by the Kuchi is a social and economic system based on the raising and herding of livestock, in which the pastoralists migrate such that they benefit to the maximum from seasonal pasture for their livestock. In Afghanistan, the climate has served as an additional motivating factor for migration, since the pastoralists’ tents provide scant protection for either summer heat or extreme winter cold.

Pastoralism is not a backward system, as is often perceived by outsiders, but a highly dynamic and opportunistic economic strategy which revolves around the management of risk and opportunism, regarding access to natural resources for the livestock. The Kuchi have evolved intricate survival technologies in support of their pastoral livelihood over the years, to manage these risks (though there is ample scope for government and development agencies to offer help - see below). For instance, the Pashtun Kuchi of southern Afghanistan have a sophisticated body of ethno-veterinary knowledge about animal diseases, treatments for animal diseases, and animal management practices (Davis *et al*., 1995). They know the regional plants and minerals well and utilize many of them in the care of their diseased livestock. They also use indigenous vaccination and surgical treatments to promote herd health.

Key to the *resilience* of Afghan pastoralists is their *mobility* and *capacity to adapt* to changing circumstances. Currently, that mobility is reduced, due to political and historical factors, which have a negative effect on their risk management capability. Other risk management strategies employed by pastoralists include: increasing herd size as a buffer against losses; joint herding of livestock, when labor availability is the limiting factor; strong conflict resolution mechanisms and allocation of grazing rights; purchase of livestock feed as supplementary feeding during winter time; ‘flushing’ of animals before winter (namely, improving body condition in summer); diversification of livelihood through involvement in non-livestock related income generating activities, such as trade, agricultural labor, sharecropping or investment in land; and, sending family members to work as migrant laborers in cities, in Afghanistan itself or neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran.

There have been political, environmental and demographic changes over recent decades to which the Kuchi have needed to adapt. This has led to the enforced genesis of several livelihood styles espoused by the Kuchi nowadays. Many have settled, own land or large transportation companies, yet still refer to themselves as Kuchi. Also, those who have lost their livestock during several decades of war or recent droughts and have been forced to settle (albeit temporarily) still refer to themselves as Kuchi, and have as yet been unable to establish a sustainable alternative livelihood. In socio-cultural terms they still form part of the Kuchi community, despite no longer being livestock-dependent or migratory. In parallel to these developments, many ‘non-Kuchi’ residents in the north also practice a transhumant production mode, in which they migrate to more elevated grazing areas (*ayloq*) during the spring or summer season, descending ahead of the winter season, leading to a blurring of boundaries between (ethnic) Kuchi and non-Kuchi.

Over recent years, income derived from migratory livestock production is often supplemented by other income sources, through settled farming or casual agricultural labor on other peoples’ land. This increased diversification of household income has been accompanied by a move towards a more semi-migratory lifestyle. Thus, there are several sub-categories within the broad term Kuchi, between which the boundaries are blurred:

* migratory, livestock-dependent
* recently settled, formerly migratory, livestock-dependent
* settled people, who still adhere to the cultural identity of Kuchi, and refer to themselves as such

The *first* category comprises several ethnic groups, predominantly Pashtun, Baluchi and Arab, but also Aimaq, and even some Tajik and Uzbek in the north. The *second* category is similar to the first, but these people have only recently settled due to the effects of war and drought. They will often live in the same geographic areas as those in the first category, and belong to the same communities. The blurred distinction with the first category is accentuated because many former ‘pastoralists’ in this category who have lost all of their own livestock still join in the migration of the first group in order to benefit from community support mechanisms and/or seasonal labor opportunities. The *third* category comprises people who have become settled over recent decades, yet still consider themselves Kuchi and feel they can be represented politically only by Kuchi leaders. This group is predominantly Pashtun.

7.2. The food security of the Kuchi[[3]](#footnote-3)

Kuchi have a special place in Afghan life. They have always been powerful within the tribal system, as the country's main providers of meat, sheepskins and wool, and as wealthy moneylenders and traders. Pastoralists continue to have an important contribution to make to the national economy, as they have in the past (though estimates vary, some 50 percent of sheep in the country are owned by pastoralists, and 35 percent of all exports are from livestock and livestock products). Pastoralists and their livestock also fill an ecological niche, through using marginal lands which cannot be put to sustainable agricultural use in another way. Yet their numbers have dwindled and many of those who survive have fallen into penury, their flocks having greatly shrunk because of the conflict, compounded by drought. Many are now reduced to living off food handouts in refugee camps. Without animals, and in particular without camels to carry their tents and household belongings, the Kuchi cannot make journeys on foot as they used to. The last few years have been so hard that many Kuchi say they now want to give up the nomadic way of life, and are asking the government for land so they can become farmers.

With increasing economic stress on the household, Kuchi men are forced to search for casual labor in the main markets. They constitute a group of migrant laborers, leaving their families behind in the ‘Kuchi areas’. Apart from livestock keeping, their skill levels are low, and unskilled labor is all they can offer. The poverty of many Kuchi these days is clear even in Kabul, where Kuchi have come unusually close to the city with their families, setting up camp on deserted factory compounds in an industrial area at the eastern edge of town.

Because of the difficulty of access to Kuchi, and their diffuse nature, statistics on their food security status are hard to come by. Afghanistan’s Central Statistics Organization (CSO) indicates that the Kuchi are slightly but not significantly better off than rural or urban settled populations, with 25 percent (350,000) of the Kuchi being food insecure, facing both protein and calorie deficiency[[4]](#footnote-4). As expected, Kuchi households consume more dairy products compared with other groups, but only by three per cent or so. Food security significantly improves in spring for the Kuchi population compared with urban and rural areas over the same period, which is probably due to a better availability of dairy products then. The main cause of food insecurity of the Kuchi (as for rural and urban non-Kuchi Afghans) is attributed to households’ lack of access to sustainable income.

The Kuchi need schools, veterinary and medical clinics that could move with the tribe during migration. Twenty years ago there were boarding schools in Kabul for Kuchi children, but those were closed during the Soviet period and since then none of their children has been educated. Their trouble began in 1979 with the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, when bombing raids and minefields killed many of their tribe. The almost continuous fighting since then has blocked their migratory routes, and tensions from later factional fighting and the Taliban era still prevent return to their traditional homes, in places like Hazarajat. The drought of 1999 onwards for seven years or so, the most severe in living memory, delivered another heavy blow, depleting Kuchi herds to such an extent that many Kuchi can no longer feed their families.

Rangelands cover around 45 percent of the total land area in Afghanistan, according to the FAO land cover map. However, further large areas which are considered barren land are/ were also used for grazing, particularly in the winter season. The total potential grazing area therefore is much larger, estimated at 70-85 percent of the total land area. No comprehensive assessment of the current status of rangelands, and the detrimental effect of the drought on it, has been conducted.

Nobody really knows how many Kuchi there are, says Dr Frauke de Weijer, who in 2002 completed a study on the vulnerability of the nomads (de Weijer, 2002). She estimated then a population of 1.3 million to 1.5 million, down from 2 million to 2.5 million in the 1960's and 70's. Of those who had recently fallen destitute, 50 percent had no livestock left. In the south, 75 percent had no livestock at all. Losing their herds has not just changed their pattern of movement, but has also endangered their very survival.

Long-term changes in summer and winter pastures have taken place over the years, including those related to climate change, and currently access to summer pastures in the Central Highlands is compromised. Customary mechanisms to determine pasture users’ rights exist, and are functioning to a certain extent. However, particularly in areas where these grazing rights have been relatively recently established, and where these were partly politically manipulated, there is a high level of conflict over such user’s rights. Increasingly, pastures have been converted to rainfed agricultural production by the local land users (notably the *Hazara*), and this has led to increased resentment and conflict. Squabbles over user-rights have become violent over recent years, and become increasingly politicized.

Destitute pastoralists, who have lost all their livestock, tend to settle permanently in their traditional winter areas. There they are often at risk of being evicted from the land by local residents or commanders. Such land tenure insecurity places additional stress on already marginalised people (Wily, 2005). All on-going policy development and research in the field of range management that has been carried out points to ‘Community-based Natural Resource Management’ as the most appropriate way forward to address rangeland management and conflict resolution. A pasture-based local negotiation process on mechanisms and conditions of use of pasture land is being promoted, through a learning-by-doing approach. A legal framework will be required to secure the desired level of legitimacy of the Range Management Plans thus obtained.

7.3. The way ahead

The Kuchi are not one entity, so there is no one path for the future, but there is a humanitarian need to rebuild their pastoral livelihood, for those who wish to continue a fully nomadic lifestyle. Support to the Kuchi means supporting them, in a demand-led manner, to develop/ maintain/ improve a sustainable livelihood, keeping in mind environmental, economic and socio-cultural factors. This still leaves development agencies with the quandary as to what extent pastoralism should be supported, or should the Kuchi be supported to find alternative non-pastoral livelihoods, to economically integrate them into the mainstream economy.

In 2005 there was a Conference in Kabul at which the Kuchi themselves were asked to share their ideas with a number of national and international authorities on pastoral livelihoods in Afghanistan. Downstream of this, a Pastoralist Support Strategy document was formulated, on behalf of the Ministry of Frontiers and Tribal Affairs, as yet still not implemented.

In addition to such technical and financial interventions, there is need to improve Kuchi representation in Afghan society at large, for them to be mainstreamed in the Afghan development process. Over the last five years there has been some significant advance in this – Kuchi are now represented in Parliament, and a Kuchi unit has been established in the President’s office. Also, the Ministry of Agriculture is devising a national development plan for them. In these three ways, the Kuchi have found a national voice. Effective institutional mechanisms need to be set up for the active inclusion of Kuchi in sectoral policy, strategy and program development.

*Risk management:* Pastoral risk management should be at the core of any Pastoral Strategy, to enable pastoralists to better manage their many risks and achieve or maintain a sustainable livelihood, through *optimising* offtake over a longer period rather than maximising it over a short period. Such management includes sustainable pasture resource management. However, the extent to which the pastoralists can actually employ these risk management strategies depends to a large extent on the institutional environment. The goal of the Strategy could be*“to establish or maintain a sustainable livelihood and increase the self-reliance of Kuchi pastoralists and former pastoralists, guided by their own choices, taking into account economic and ecological determinants of sustainability”.*

Effective pastoral risk management relies on policies that enable pastoralists to employ the risk management strategies that they rely on. It is the responsibility of the Afghan government to ensure that the *institutional* environment is conducive to *pastoral risk management*. Clarity and security over access to resources is a prerequisite for effective risk management, even if this means reduced access compared with past years. Securing access to resources is therefore of the highest importance, the foundation of all other potential interventions. Risk management strategies comprise risk preparedness, risk mitigation, relief and rehabilitation.

Risk *preparedness* includes:

* strong institutional representation (from both Government and pastoral associations), to advocate for enabling policies
* security and clarity over access to the resources (secure mobility)
* risk-spreading strategies

Risk *mitigation, relief and rehabilitation* would involve both pastoralists and government in these phases through a process of joint planning, in support of both the (interlinked) pastoral livelihood and non-pastoral livelihood. These need to be flanked by supporting sub-strategies, building a conducive institutional environment. Four strategy implementation mechanisms may be considered:

* *Advocacy:* Increased expression of the perspective of the Kuchi in policy and strategy development in all sectors, through building institutional capacity.
* *Mainstreaming:* Increased inclusion of the Kuchi in on-going national programs.
* *Research:* Initiation of additional research with regard to the pastoral livelihood, the resource base it depends on, and the marketing chains associated with it.
* *Programming:* An integrated approach may be obtained through combining various activities in more comprehensive programs. To support the pastoral livelihood, a Community-based Integrated Pastoral Development Program can be envisaged; to support the non-pastoral livelihood, an integrated approach can be achieved through a Skills Development Program. These programs will need to be piloted first in targeted areas, and expanded on the basis of lessons learnt.

*Modernisation:*Pastoralism can be adapted to modern circumstances, and this is already taking place - for instance, through trucking of livestock from winter to summer areas. In addition to the much-needed support to pastoralism, opportunities should also be availed to those who want to leave pastoralism; either to diversify their income base within the household so that the remaining members can continue their livestock production, or as a total shift away from the herding lifestyle. Though it understands that the Kuchi require a specific approach due to their livelihood modalities, the capacity of the Ministry of Frontiers and Tribal Affairs is still relatively weak to establish and effectively maintain the required institutional and coordination mechanisms with other line Ministries which are less familiar with seasonal pastoral migration. In the past this has resulted in ‘passive exclusion’ of Kuchi from sectoral programs which address settled communities.

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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