**IYRP Alliance 2026
Working Group on Pastoralism and Carbon Trade**

**Concept note: Centring pastoralist knowledge in the evolving discourse on carbon, climate, and land**

**Rationale**

Rangeland-based carbon trade is expanding globally, promising climate mitigation through land restoration. However, these schemes are often designed without consulting pastoralists. They frequently overlook pastoralism’s agroecological value and frame it as a driver of degradation. This narrative leads to land-use shifts that marginalise pastoralists, disrupt customary tenure, provoke land conflict, and sometimes cause further degradation—even within project boundaries. The result is a misalignment between carbon finance and the socio-ecological systems it aims to support.

This approach misses a critical opportunity. Securing, supporting, and expanding ecologically embedded pastoral systems is a more promising and more sustainable strategy for rangeland restoration—economically, socially and ecologically—than enforcing exogenous rangeland-management techniques on inevitably limited areas.

Pastoralism evolved by mimicking the behaviour of wild herbivores, and thrived by replicating and complementing their ecological functions, as a constitutive element of rangeland ecosystems. This ecological integration—managing the unpredictable variability of nature and indeed specialising in benefitting from it—is a distinctive trait of pastoralism even in the context of extensive/grazing systems.

Pastoralism’s agroecological value is well established ([McGahey et al 2014](https://portals.iucn.org/library/node/44878); [FAO 2021](https://openknowledge.fao.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/daaee65e-901d-4541-a6d0-e1f69278d469/content)) and its capacity for carbon sequestration is proven ([Assouma et al 2019](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0140196318303744); [CaSSECS](https://www.cassecs.org)). Mobility-based pastoral systems not only provide high-quality livestock products, but sequester carbon while supporting biodiversity and community adaptation.

Integration between pastoralism and crop farming enhances the carbon benefits and resilience of land-use mosaics. Seasonal complementarities—such as manure exchange, residue use, and shared fallows—support diversified livelihoods while improving soil carbon sequestration.

Placing pastoralism—and its knowledge––at the centre of rangeland carbon initiatives could greatly increase the generation of carbon credits. Done with attention to gender equity and women’s leadership, this shift would transform rangeland-pastoralism-cropland systems, promoting ecological sustainability, economic viability, and peaceful, equitable relations. It would also help make pastoralism a more desirable option for future generations.

Carbon, however, is only part of the picture. This Working Group will address the full range of ecosystem services and nature-based solutions—biodiversity, water regulation, nutrient cycling, soil biological activity and fertility, fire control, woody vegetation dynamics, and land degradation neutrality—all of which relate to pastoralism and deserve reconsideration through an up-to-date understanding of it.

**Goal**

The Working Group aims to produce a concise, evidence-based **policy brief** offering guidance to policymakers, funders, and project developers. The brief will advocate for carbon initiatives grounded *in the practice of pastoralism*—not schemes that merely recruit pastoralists to adopt external herd management techniques. It will emphasise equity, ecological soundness, and enforceability, with co-designed mechanisms securing broad community ownership and intersectional representation while reducing the risk of elite capturing.

**The brief may also address:**

* governance of carbon schemes (institutions, processes, structures);
* trade-offs and synergies with mainstream livelihoods (e.g. dairy, fattening units, crop-farming);
* community perceptions and drivers of participation;
* payment options beyond the condition of “additionality” (payment for *additional* carbon sequestration)—e.g. for maintaining healthy soil, biodiversity, or stewardship.

Our guiding question will be: “What must be said about rangeland-based carbon trade to ensure the perspective of pastoralism is not overlooked or misrepresented?”

**Expected outcomes**

1. Policy brief on embedding pastoralist practice at the heart of rangeland carbon initiatives.
2. Stakeholder matrix mapping existing projects and their effects on pastoralist communities.
3. Learning session with key stakeholders on best approaches.

**Additional (resource pending) activities**

1. Compile a curate literature repository on carbon sequestration in pastoral systems, nutrient cycling, biodiversity, and limitations of lifecycle assessments.
2. Document traditional and current pastoralist practices relevant to carbon markets.
3. Map rangeland-based carbon projects globally, (and croplands where relevant) and their impact on communities.
4. Map enabling conditions for carbon projects, in terms of policy and legal frameworks (e.g., taxation).
5. Analyse narratives and assumptions in carbon projects and their impact on land tenure and governance.
6. Critically interrogate the concept of ‘additionality’ and its economic and ecological effects in pastoralist contexts.
7. Review standards used by certifiers (e.g., Verra), highlighting mismatches with pastoralist realities.
8. Advocate for fair benefit-sharing, recognition of customary governance, and locally appropriate methods.
9. Host dialogues among researchers, pastoralists, elders, and religious leaders, to share insights and raise collective awareness.
10. Deliver training for Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities on carbon opportunities and risks.