

A few words about (un)certainty and its management in the rural part of the contemporary uncertain world

Review of the book: Scoones I. (Ed.) (2023) *Pastoralism, Uncertainty and Development, Rugby: Practical Action Publishing*. 180 p. URL: <https://practicalactionpublishing.com/book/2667/pastoralism-uncertainty-and-development>

Irina V. Trotsuk, DSc (Sociology), Professor, Sociology Department, RUDN University; Senior Researcher, Center for Agrarian Studies, Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration; Intercenter, Moscow School of Social and Economic Sciences, Vernadskogo Prosp., 82. Moscow, 119571.
E-mail: irina.trotsuk@yandex.ru

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When considering the contemporary rural life and agricultural activities related to it, pastoralism is unlikely to be anyone's first association. Today (at least in Russia) pastoralism seems to be a very regionally, even locally specific phenomenon of a historical-anachronical nature, associated with the historically sustainable traditional practices of local rural communities, which would be considered by the townspeople majority as an outdated way to earn one's living and an example of hoary antiquity (as today's societies are not communities of foragers and pastoralists). Therefore, the book provides an unexpected (at least for the average reader) analytical perspective of "mobile pastoralism as a crucial livelihood for millions worldwide", "a vital practice, which sustains communities in often harsh and hostile environments", and of pastoralists as "experts in managing uncertainty" and "in adapting to climate change"; thus, insisting on the need for a "far more participatory, context specific analysis" for "reversing the dismal performance of decades of 'pastoral development'".

The book is a collection of articles (presented as nine chapters) by authors who consider special 'cases' to show "how pastoralists make productive use of variability and embrace uncertainty" and to explain "how pastoral systems in marginal dryland and montane systems work"; thus, "offering wider lessons for rethinking development policy and practice in today's uncertain, turbulent world"¹ (climate and

1. See also: Stirling A. (2010) Keep it complex. *Nature*, no 468; Scoones I., Stirling A. (Eds.) (2020) *The Politics of Uncertainty: Challenges of Transformation*, London: Routledge.

environmental change, market volatility and political turmoil). The choice of the book's topic is explained in its preface by the following contradiction: on the one hand, pastoralists are often marginalized in policy debates and development efforts; on the other hand, they are "important guardians of vast rangeland territories that make up over half the world's land surface; pastoralism generates livelihoods for many and provides animal-based products that enhance people's diets in some of the poorest parts of the world. Despite their vital importance, pastoral systems are often deeply misunderstood, with false narratives dominating policy and public discourse alike. The book offers a different set of perspectives (Amdo Tibet in China, the Mediterranean hills of Sardinia in Italy, the savannas of East Africa in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia, the dry plains of Kachchh in Gujarat in India, and the semi-desert and rocky mountains of southern Tunisia), rooted in in-depth research across six countries (Ethiopia, Kenya, Tunisia, China, India and Italy) in three continents (Africa, Asia, Europe), ...challenging mainstream thinking about pastoral development, offering a new narrative with variability and uncertainty at the center, and a unique lens on pastoralists' own understandings of variable and uncertain contexts through an innovative documentary photography and photovoice project".

Already at this point, the critical reader may question such broad generalizations (pastoralists' successful fight against uncertainty) based on such countries-cases — as not representing the situation on the corresponding continents not to mention general trends of socially-economically diverse rural paths of sustainable development. However, such criticism is not justified as the authors aim only at convincing the reader that the still available paths of (rural) development are much more diverse than we are used (or prefer) to think.

In the first chapter "Pastoralism, uncertainty, and development: Perspectives from the rangelands", Ian Scoones and Michele Nori claim that we can learn from pastoralists "in order to be better at responding to the uncertainties of our turbulent world" as they "confront uncertainties on a daily basis and always have done so²... In the drylands and mountains where pastoralists live, negotiating access to resources, navigating volatile markets, making use of varying social relations in times of stress, and responding to conflict and complex political dynamics are all essential if sustainable livelihoods are to be generated". Thus, "pastoralists can help us reframe policies and practices in ways that go beyond a risk man-

2. See also: FAO (2021) Pastoralism — Making Variability Work. Animal Production and Health Paper 185. URL: <https://doi.org/10.4060/cb5855en>; Krätli S., Schareika N. (2010) Living off uncertainty: The intelligent animal production of dryland pastoralists. *European Journal of Development Research*, vol. 22.

agement and control approach to one that genuinely confronts situations where we don't know what the future holds". The authors argue that we prefer development policy and practice "blind to uncertainty" due to striving for advance planning as ensuring stability and control, and such a standard risk assessment is definitely appropriate for contexts with high level of predictability (for instance, in construction) but not for situations of 'unknown unknowns' — "where we know nothing about the outcomes or the likelihoods (and complex, messy contexts are the norm in development settings, perhaps especially in pastoral areas)".

Certainly, this does not mean that we should stop our studies of critical infrastructures, stop relying on expert assessments and technological and information support and use only 'indigenous knowledge'. The authors argue that "in pastoral areas, well-meaning efforts — such as land governance reforms, insurance mechanisms, market support, and social protection programs — will fail if they don't take uncertainty seriously", which means "temporal and spatial flexibility, with redundancy central to organizational design... and a shift from a commitment to 'control' — and prediction, stability, and planning — to one that is centered on social relationships and institutions that support flexible and adaptive responses to the inevitable uncertainties of today's world"³.

The thoughtful, interested reader cannot not help but wonder why we have not yet learnt and applied so useful and successful (given pastoralism survival in the contemporary postindustrial world of industrial agribusiness) pastoralists' experience of 'uncertainty management'. The authors give three reasons: the first objective one is that today even the achieved managed uncertainty of pastoralists is under threat due to encroachment and fragmentation of rangelands⁴ under the general trend of land grabbing for agricultural, infrastructural or conservation investments. Some of them can benefit pastoralists (jobs, services, and so on) but more often lead to new forms of competition, speculation, corruption and deal-making that undermine local networks and communities. The second reason is that there is "the wider, longstanding, well-entrenched colonial narrative that pastoralists are 'backward', envi-

3. See also: Scoones I. (2021) Pastoralists and peasants: Perspectives on agrarian change. *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 48.

4. See also: Lind J., Okenwa D., Scoones I. (2020) The politics of land, resources & investment in Eastern Africa's pastoral drylands. (J. Lind, D. Okenwa, I. Scoones Eds.). *Land Investment & Politics: Reconfiguring Eastern Africa's Pastoral Drylands*, Woodbridge: James Currey; Lind J., Sabates-Wheeler R., Caravani M., Biang Deng Kuol L., Manzollilo Nightingale D. (2020) Newly evolving pastoral and postpastoral rangelands of Eastern Africa. *Pastoralism*, vol. 10; Behnke R. H. (2021) Grazing into the Anthropocene or back to the future? *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, vol. 5.

ronmentally destructive, and in need of ‘modernization’”, and “a strong Western and urban narrative about the dangers of livestock production for the climate and the wider environment”. Both narratives derive from “a basic misunderstanding of the dynamics of open ecosystems and the importance of variability in rangelands⁵”, while even the insufficient available data from high-intensity industrial systems proves that “pastoral production systems have low climate impacts and can, under the right conditions, have positive benefits for the environment”.

The third reason is that “not all is well in the pastoral rangelands... there are many challenges. The adaptive flexibility at the heart of pastoralists’ responses to variability and uncertainty may not always work. Strategies developed decades ago may not be sufficient to sustain fast-growing populations and may be unable to confront the more frequent droughts, floods, and compounding uncertainties faced today. Pastoralists must always innovate, adapt, and change to new circumstances. However, things are not always easy as a result of constrained access to resources, terms of trade that penalize pastoral production, and state or donor support that is often lacking or misplaced, given the false narratives that still dominate policy thinking”.

Such a focus on the first chapter is determined by its role in the book: it outlines main research and economic policy questions, presents possible ways for finding answers to these questions, clarifying these ways’ potential and limitations, explains the choice of case studies sites, and emphasizes that the book “does not attempt to paint a rosy picture of an imagined, pastoralist idyll now long-lost — if it ever even existed. The case studies... provide a flavor of the complex, contested, and highly differentiated realities in different sites influenced by diverse political economies”.

Therefore, the next chapters illustrate the conceptual and practical ideas of the first chapter, but the second chapter “Decoding uncertainty in pastoral contexts through visual methods” is methodological. Shibaji Bose and Roopa Gogineni present an overview of approaches and techniques used in case studies “to surface and convey the diversity of pastoralists’ experience” as “storytelling through visual methods facilitates an engaged process of building knowledge that can eventually foster positive social change from below”: photovoice (pastoralists shared beliefs and perceptions within their own frameworks of understanding and experiences of contending with unfolding uncertainties); social media ethnography; rephotography (visual materials from archival sources allowed for inter-

5. See also: Bond W. J. (2019) *Open Ecosystems: Ecology and Evolution Beyond the Forest Edge*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; Vetter S. (2020) With power comes responsibility — a rangelands perspective on forest landscape restoration. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, vol. 4.

pretations of change across time by comparing images from today with those in the past); photo elicitation; documentary photo/video by researchers and other interlocutors; visualizing uncertainty identified through interviews or surveys in group discussions (the book presents many pictures and quotes from transcripts); circulation of visual materials (photographs and their linked narratives were shared through a variety of platforms, including travelling in-person exhibitions, online exhibitions, and photo newspapers). Thus, “to understand uncertainty from the eyes of the pastoralists has always been a challenge to the traditional researcher aiming to build research credibility, give back the results of the research to the communities at the margins, and build knowledge together; participatory visual research methods were able to unearth hidden tensions in uncertain pastoral landscapes”.

In the third chapter, Natasha Maru describes the ways for “Engaging with uncertainties in the now: Pastoralists’ experiences of mobility in Western India” (case study of the Rabari from Kachchh District in Gujarat). The author defines uncertainty in two ways: “empirically, in the sense of uncertain events and circumstances, and as a strategy applied by pastoralists to adapt to new circumstances”, and “sees variability and change as intrinsically temporal, and these temporalities as central to pastoralists’ mobile practices, social relations, and institutions. On the one hand, the author emphasizes, providing convincing ‘grassroots’ examples from the life of Rabari pastoralists, that “mobility and its temporalities are key to pastoral adaptation to uncertainty... the practices, social relations, and institutions of mobility are flexible, prompt, and modular in design to enable the pastoralists to adapt to new and unknown circumstances as they emerge. Being so attuned means that rather than following a linear path, the pastoralists embrace uncertainty as a strategy and act in response to an ever-changing present”. On the other hand, pastoralists’ capacity to adapt is challenged “as shifts in political economy fail to account for pastoral livelihoods. Despite growing recognition of pastoralism within international development as both economically viable and environmentally beneficial, the ‘sediment of nomadism’ continues to undermine pastoralism and privilege linear visions of modernity, development, and progress. In Kachchh, such developmentalism has led to the structural oppression and marginalization of pastoralists through adverse policies... The temporal horizon within which pastoral action is oriented is increasingly being disrupted through shifts in political economy”.

In the fourth chapter, Palden Tsering considers the “Hybrid rangeland governance: Ways of living with and from uncertainty in pastoral Amdo Tibet, China”, providing a table of different responses to uncertainty in the Tibetan context, which is based on the researcher’s discussions with local residents. The author ar-

gues that “the fluid processes and connections at the center of interactions between nature and humans enable pastoralists both to live with and from uncertainty, making use of uncertainties as possibilities and opportunities for adaptation and transformation”. The author explains “how Amdo pastoralists transform these perceptions into actions on the ground”, focusing on the role of Buddhist monasteries in resource governance (both the local authority and intermediary between villages and local government) and on the pluralistic nature of such governance in general: the ‘hybrid governance of rangelands’ “goes beyond the classic description of private, common, or state-led forms of tenure... especially the process of building assemblages of actors, practices, technologies, and forms of knowledge allows herders both to respond to uncertainties as they arise, as well as make the most of opportunities that emerge from uncertain settings”.

In the fifth chapter, Giulia Simula considers “Uncertainty, markets, and pastoralism in Sardinia, Italy” (in Sardinia, pastoralists constitute the great majority of those who work in agriculture) and focuses on two opposing realities of pastoralism in two different settings — a livestock producer engaged in semi-intensive production in the plains area in the south and sells milk to a private industry operator (the developmental techno-managerial control adage ‘If you plan ahead, there is no uncertainty’), and a small pastoralist living in the north, who can flexibly respond to uncertainty through a range of adaptive practices. According to the author, “believing that technical, productivist solutions can address the intersecting uncertainties created by markets, climate, and agricultural policy in the context of Sardinia is a sign that the state/expert perspective is far from the realities of pastoralists... In contrast to the assumptions of many policymakers and experts, pastoralists do not live in stable conditions but in highly variable, uncertain, and often harsh and precarious situations... Pastoral farms function within a complex system that is influenced by many elements, so assuming that economic efficiency — and an economic rationality based on a linear understanding of demand and supply and cost and benefit — is the guiding principle is a deep misunderstanding... As a result, pastoralists are very skeptical about top-down programs and incentives⁶. This is not because they are ignorant or ‘backward’, as they are very often portrayed, but because they know very well that they live and survive in uncertain circumstances. They necessarily work with contingency, always leaving several doors open as there are always multiple futures possible depending on what uncertainties impinge on them”.

6. See also: Scott J. C. (1998) *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

In the sixth chapter, Tahira Mohamed describes the ways for “Responding to uncertainties in pastoral northern Kenya (Isiolo County)”, asking “whether the state, humanitarian agencies, and development interventions have missed their mark by focusing on predicting and controlling risks rather than embracing and managing uncertainties as part of continuous, everyday practices of generating reliability, i.e., could pastoralists themselves, through their adaptive strategies and redistributive moral economy practices, show us an alternative approach more attuned to dryland uncertainties?”. The answer is that “pastoralists should not be seen as passive victims of disaster, forever reliant on external support, but that they have their own agency; their own practices embedded in social relations (moral economy⁷) help them respond to complex, uncertain, and unpredictable events. Living with and from uncertainty is central to pastoral livelihoods, and it should be fundamental to the disaster response policies and development strategies in pastoral areas”. Four cases illustrate and confirm the author’s idea that “moral economy practices enhance resource redistribution and foster collective solidarities and comradeship to help manage uncertainties, including those due to drought, animal disease, livestock-raiding, and labor deficits”.

The seventh chapter by Masresha Taye considers “Livestock insurance in southern Ethiopia (Borana)”, comparing responses to drought risk and contrasting the social-economic backgrounds of insured and uninsured households to show “how insurance, if purchased, is always combined with other responses and, in this way, pastoralists are able to respond to uncertainties, not just defined, calculable risks”. Thus, “insurance must become embedded in wider social relations (such as gender dynamics), institutional arrangements (such as mobility and pastoral resource governance), economic livelihood strategies, and political dynamics in pastoral systems. As a market-based, individualized approach, insurance is not in any way superior to what are deemed ‘traditional coping mechanisms’, as is sometimes suggested. Indeed, quite the opposite: it is such embedded local responses that make it possible for insurance to function as a complement to collective, communal forms of response grounded in forms of local solidarity and moral economy”.

In the eighth chapter, Linda Pappagallo continues the analysis of the African ‘case’, focusing on the “Confronting uncertainties in southern Tunisia: The role of migration and collective resource management”. For instance, “the harsh context of Douiret — with multiple, intersecting environmental and market uncertainties — dictates how resilience is built through migration, and the rela-

7. According to: Scott J. C. (1977) *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia*, New Haven: Yale University Press.

tionship between presence and absence. This allows for the taking of opportunities for accumulation elsewhere while remaining connected to one's territory of origin through collective pooling mechanisms, such as the *khlata*. Combining migration with collective pooling explains how pastoralists in Douiret navigate the uncertainties associated with such variable socio-ecological landscapes. As the types of uncertainties shift with changing environmental and political-economic conditions, so the strategies and forms of institutions shift to respond to the new conditions. Understanding institutional adaptation and the evolution of the *khlata* thus further highlights the importance of adaptable and informal collective resource management".

In the final ninth chapter, Ian Scoones and Michele Nori summarize the ways for "Living with and from uncertainty: Lessons from pastoralists for development", providing a brief review of pastoral policies in the regions of case studies to identify their common and contrasting features (presented in their regional diversity and similarity). What is most common is that "unfortunately, the majority of existing policies run counter to the principles of pastoralism... acting to undermine pastoral practices rather than support them. Of course, development policies and interventions are not uniform, and there are many projects scattered across the world that do offer a perspective drawing on principles of openness, flexibility, and adaptation to generate reliable, robust, and resilient livelihoods in the pastoral rangelands. But these remain a minority". The authors rightly conclude that today "conditions of uncertainty are faced by many people across the world... If we are to respond to climate change, market volatility, changing environments, migratory flows, more frequent pandemics, and rising conflict, we can and must learn from those who have developed the capacities to live with and from uncertainty. Thinking about how pastoralists respond to uncertainty can be important, whether thinking about pastoral mobility when constructing human migration policies; designing social assistance and humanitarian relief approaches that avoid centralized risk-based approaches; fostering market integration dynamics that build around local practices and networks; supporting knowledge networking and exchange as part of extension efforts to increase reliability; redesigning insurance schemes to support a more varied response; thinking about preparedness for pandemics or disasters more generally; or even rethinking banking, finance, and economic policymaking itself". This list seems too extensive and too promising (on the verge of social utopia), however, one cannot but agree that "in our turbulent world, where uncertainties affect us all, insights from pastoralism can be enormously helpful".

Несколько слов о (не)определенности и управлению ею в сельской части современного нестабильного мира

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Ирина Владимировна Троцук, доктор социологических наук, профессор кафедры социологии Российского университета дружбы народов имени Патриса Лумумбы; ведущий научный сотрудник Центра аграрных исследований Российской академии народного хозяйства и государственной службы при Президенте Российской Федерации и Интерцентра МВШСЭН. 119571, Москва, просп. Вернадского, 82. E-mail: irina.trotsuk@yandex.ru