Pastoralism in the Maghreb: A Review on Environmental, Socio-cultural, Economic and Political Aspects

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Introduction

The opinions about pastoralism in the Mediterranean diverge among scholars and other stakeholders. Some consider that agro-pastoral systems (APS) are marginal systems of low economic productivity, while others highlight the notorious multifunctional nature of APS and their role in the provision of multiple ecosystem services (ES). Scientific evidence and data are crucial to highlight the multiple roles of pastoralism. This review casts light on research regarding pastoralism in the Maghreb (viz. Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia) by analysing the benefits and challenges from the environmental, socio-cultural, economic and political points of views.

Methods

Article Type: Systematic review.
Indexing database: Web of Science.
Search date: 17 July 2020.
Search query: (pastoralism OR pastoralist) AND (Maghreb OR “North Africa” OR Algeria OR Morocco OR Tunisia).
Document selection process: The search yielded 113 documents and 68 eligible documents were included in the systematic review.

Results and Discussion

Environment

- Many pastoralists have been able to adapt to climate change (e.g. rainfall variability and droughts), especially mobile pastoralists.
- Promotion of mobile pastoralism might be a valuable option to increase resilience against climate change in arid and semi-arid areas (Freier et al., 2014).
- Commercial agriculture development decreased mobile pastoralism (cf. transhumance).
- Pastoralism is considered as a cause of land degradation, desertification and deforestation.
- Pastoralists contribute to the overexploitation of groundwater resources especially in arid Saharan areas.
- Depletion of pastoral resources as a result of frequent droughts and decrease in the grazing area are among the main challenges faced by pastoralists.

Society and Culture

- Pastoralism is an integral part of the traditions in the Maghreb.
- Archaeological records and rock engravings/paintings show different features associated with pastoralism, transhumance and herding.
- Literature highlights the huge local knowledge of pastoralists (e.g. recognising and naming forage plants and rangeland types).
- There is an ongoing erosion of pastoral indigenous knowledge and culture.
- Modernisation of pastoralism affected the culture of pastoral communities but some modern technologies (e.g. mobile phones) improved social cohesion among nomadic populations (Vidal-Gonzalez and Nahhass, 2018).
- Livelihood security of pastoral households is threatened by changing social context, climate, land use.
- Resilience and adaptive capacity of pastoralists is shown by transformations in their livelihoods (e.g. agro-pastoralism, ‘sedentarisation’).
- Pastoralists face different socio-cultural challenges such as rural exodus and the lack of social recognition.

Economy

- There is a dearth of articles addressing pastoralism economics in the Maghreb.
- ‘Sedentarisation’ of mobile pastoralists improves access to services and markets, and reduces transaction costs (Davies and Hatfield, 2007).
- Vulnerability of income to dryer climate is lower in mobile (transhumant) pastoralism compared to sedentary pastoralism (Freier et al., 2014).
- Pastoralism is the primary economic activity in the arid and semi-arid steppe areas of North Africa (Dutilly-Diane, 2007).

Policy and Governance

- Policies are addressed in two different ways: (1) analysing the current policies that shape pastoralism, and/or (2) highlighting needed policy interventions.
- Knowledge and traditions of pastoralists/agro-pastoralists can be safeguarded thanks to heritage policies (Ben Hounet et al., 2016; Dutilly-Diane, 2007).
- Governance: Customary management of collectively-owned land rangelands and pastures is often blamed for chaotic or unsustainable land use, but these customary land tenure systems have been effective in mediating transformations of land use and livelihoods (Rignall and Kusumo, 2018).

Conclusions

Despite its multifunctional benefits, pastoralism is still perceived as ecologically damaging, economically unproductive, and culturally backward. Indeed, the analysed literature focuses on the negative impacts of pastoralism and the challenges faced by pastoral communities. Therefore, it is important to raise awareness about the role of pastoralism in the Maghreb to increase public investment in the sector. For that, a good starting point can be to devote more attention to pastoralism and pastoralists in the research agenda, in order to produce sound data and evidence to inform policies. In fact, the review shows that there is a gap in research on pastoralism in the Maghreb. Future research should highlight the role of pastoralism in the provision of ES and public goods, and as an integral part of the cultural and social assets of the Maghrebi countries and communities. There is also a need to reform the governance of the whole sector by, inter alia, improving the political representation of pastoral communities.

References


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