



A House Full of Trap Doors. Identifying barriers to resilient drylands in the toolbox of pastoral development

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The theoretical understanding of drylands and pastoral systems has long undergone a U-turn from the initial perspective rooted in classical ecology. The shift has hinged on the way to represent asymmetric variability, from a disturbance in an ecosystem that naturally tends towards uniformity and stability, to a constitutive part of a dynamic ecosystem.

Operationalising the new reversed perspective, including the need to update the methodological infrastructure to plan around drylands and pastoral development, remains a challenge. Underlying assumptions about stability and uniformity, that are a legacy of equilibrium thinking, remain embedded in the toolbox of pastoral development, starting from the technical language to talk about the subject.

This effectively gets in the way of operationalizing state of the art understanding of pastoral systems and the drylands. Unless these barriers are identified, unpacked and managed, even the present calls for increasing the rigour and intensity of data collection—for example as part of the ongoing global process to revise and improve agricultural data—cannot deliver a realistic representation of pastoral systems in statistics and policy making.

This contribution presents the case for understanding variability as an asset, and provides a range of examples of methodological barriers, including classifications of livestock systems, scale of observation, key parameters in animal production, indicators in the measurement of ecological efficiency, concepts of ecological fragility, natural resources, and pastoral risk. The need to update this legacy is a pressing challenge for policy makers concerned with both modernisation and resilience in the drylands.