

Cattle used as currency in southern Africa

Agricultural extension officers and development workers in southern Africa need to work with traditional and religious leaders to harness cultural attitudes towards livestock ownership in order to help farming families become more resilient in the face of a warming, dry climate. This is the finding of researchers who recently visited northern Namibia, to test the cultural attitudes that influence how farmers manage their livestock herds during times of drought.



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A team of geographers from the African Climate and Development Initiative (ACDI) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in South Africa, and researchers from the University of Namibia (UNAM), visited northern Namibia between 2015 and 2017, to see how farmers had responded to the drought that gripped the region from 2013 to 2016.

Most farmers in southern Africa treat their herds as an investment and sell off animals when a family needs cash to pay for school fees, make building repairs, or to cover the cost of a cultural event such as a wedding or funeral.

“We might assume that the obvious thing to do in a drought, when the herd is threatened with starvation, is to sell your livestock as a way of protecting your wealth. But we have found that there are many reasons why people do not do that,” explains Cecil Togarepi, an agricultural economist from UNAM who spoke with Namibian farmers.

Togarepi and fellow researchers visited drought-affected farmers in Namibia to test how cultural attitudes towards livestock ownership influenced the management of their farms and herds, and how this might feed into their levels of vulnerability as the climate continues to shift here.

A man is his cattle

Researchers found that many farmers chose to risk their investment by not selling herds in spite of drought warnings, because of the long-standing belief that a family’s **wealth and status** are tied in with the size of the family herd.

Understanding this can help policymakers and development workers across drier parts of Southern Africa work more effectively with communities in order to help them adopt farming practices that offset the greatest threats that may come with climate change in future.

“Farmers here have a strong **cultural attachment** to their livestock,” says Togarepi. “As one farmer said, ‘a man is his cattle’. This attitude makes farmers reluctant to sell their herds, even when there are forecasts of severe drought.

Farmers slow to adopt climate-smart practices

In parts of Southern Africa, where conditions are already semi-desert, climate change is going to mean higher temperature, less predictable rain, and longer drought periods. This is going to put farmers’ herds at much greater risk,” explains Togarepi. “We need to think about how to work with communities, particularly with traditional and religious leaders, in ways that still honour these beliefs, but that also encourage farmers to make decisions which help them absorb the shock of the drought.”

The Namibian government has already adopted a policy that promotes climate-smart agricultural practices, which include installing drip irrigation, switching to drought-resistant grain and livestock breeds, or reverting to traditional land tilling which uses draught-animal power instead of tractors.

Namibian farmers have, however, been slow to adopt these practices owing to religious beliefs, a reliance on traditional knowledge, and the symbolic significance of certain agricultural practices, the ACDI research found.

Rather than seeing these attitudes as a barrier, researchers argue that they can be turned into opportunities. By working with religious and traditional value systems, extension workers could promote climate-smart practices in a way that helps reduce the impacts of climate change and variability on these farmers.

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