

Accounting for pastoralists in Afghanistan



Photo: Tracy Hunter

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RANGELANDS COVER APPROXIMATELY 30.2 million hectares, or about 47% of Afghanistan's land area. Another 22 million hectares (34%) of barren land and deserts are used for opportunistic seasonal grazing. These lands include the central highlands, the deserts of the south and southwest, the Turkestan plains in the north, and the Pamir mountains in the northeast. They have a range of vegetation types, including alpine flora, pistachio woodlands, steppe, shrublands and desert ecosystems, with more than 4,000 plant species recorded.

These lands provide forage for about 35 million livestock, raised by an estimated 68% of Afghanistan's rural households. Herders have grazed their livestock here for centuries, migrating between summer and winter pastures across the country each year. Some 2 to 3 million people, or about 10% of the population are thought to practise pastoralism. They own more than 70% of the country's livestock, which according to latest livestock census (2016–17) comprised 22 million sheep, 10 million goats, 3.7 million cattle, 3,220 yaks (only in the Pamir region), 169,300 camels and about 12 million poultry.

The pastoralists are known as "Kuchi", a term derived from the Persian *kuch*, which means to move or regularly migrate. Kuchi is a generic term used for all migratory pastoralists in Afghanistan, encompassing ethnic groups such as Pashtun, Tajik, Uzbek, Aimaq, Hazara, Kyrgyz, Wakhi, Turkmen and Baluch. All these tribes are partially or fully involved in pastoralism. The Pashtun are the most

Key messages

- The rangelands that cover much of Afghanistan provide forage for livestock and support millions of pastoralists.
- Fully or partly nomadic pastoralists, known as "Kuchi", make up around 10% of Afghanistan's population. They migrate between summer pastures in the highlands and winter pastures in the lowlands.
- Some pastoralists have settled permanently and graze their animals year-round on communal pastures nearby. Others no longer own animals but retain their Kuchi identity.
- The pastoralists own more than 70% of the country's livestock and produce most of the live animals and meat consumed there.
- Many pastoralists are poor and marginalized, lacking education, health and other services. Securing access to their traditional grazing lands is a major problem.
- Accurate, updated information on pastoralism is scarce. This hinders the design of policies and suitable interventions.
- A conducive socio-political environment and supportive policies are essential to ensure the sustainability of pastoralism.



Regions of Afghanistan



Migration routes in Afghanistan

influential group, with strong control over many pastoral lands. In the east, they live in black goat-hair tents, or *ghizhdi*; in the south near Kandahar, they are known as *Powindahs*, and in western and northern Afghanistan they are called *Maldar*. Most pastoralists (some 52%) are nomadic and migrate over long distances. Transhumant herders tend to move shorter distances; they make up 33% of the total. The remaining 15% are sedentary.

Some 38.6% of all households in the country are thought to own one or more cattle, according to a survey by the Central Statistics Organization in 2016/17, while 26.5% own sheep and 23.8% own goats. Among the Kuchi, the figures are much higher: 81.6% of Kuchi households own sheep, 71.6% own goats, and 45.2% own chickens. Pastoralists own virtually all the country's camels and yaks.

There were about 1.5 million nomadic and semi-nomadic Kuchi out of a total population of 29.1 million in 2016/17. The Kuchi tend to be poor and marginalized. Only 6.6% have attended primary school, and education beyond primary school for girls is virtually non-existent. Very few Kuchi women can read or write. Only 37% live within an hour's walk of a public health facility, and 0.1% have a bank account. While they tend to be poorer than settled people in rural and urban areas, they tend to suffer less from food insecurity – though paradoxically, they are more likely to experience moderate or severe hunger.

Nomadic pastoralists migrate with their entire families over long distances. They have no permanent dwellings, but travel in caravans with baggage animals such as horses, camels and donkeys, setting up camp where they find suitable grazing and water sources. On difficult terrain, they may cover 5 kilometres a day, while on easier routes in the plains they may travel up to 20 kilometres. On average, they travel about 500 kilometres between their summer and winter bases. A key feature of these Kuchi nomads is their communal lifestyle: they neither travel nor reside in isolation. They remain in groups of 4–6 households, sharing resources, knowledge and labour.

Major tribes who practise this type of pastoralism are the Pashtun, Baloch, Hazara, Tajik and Kyrgyz. The animals they keep depend on the local conditions. The Kuchi and Baloch in the southwest herd mainly sheep, goats and camels; the Hazara and Tajik in the central and northern highlands raise sheep, goats, and cattle, while the Kyrgyz in the Pamir and Wakhan Corridor keep yaks, sheep and goats. A single nuclear family owns an average of about 100 animals; a group of households has an average herd size ranging from 300 to 500 animals. These pastoralists typically raise Central Asia's unique breeds of sheep: the fat-tailed sheep (Turki) and Persian lamb (Karakul). These breeds are well-adapted to the local conditions, resilient to diseases and highly valuable commercially.

Transhumant pastoralists are semi-nomadic herders who have partially settled but still refer to themselves as "Kuchi". They live close to nomadic pastoralists and belong to the same ethnic groups. They practise transhumance as well as growing crops, doing seasonal labour and trading in livestock. They migrate seasonally between fixed settlements in the summer and winter pastures, covering shorter distances than the nomadic pastoralists. The herders move to the uplands with their herds in the summers, leaving some of their family members behind in the villages to take care of the crops and do casual labour. The transhumants herd their animals in the Hindu Kush-Pamir

Mountain ranges that includes central highlands of Hazarajat, as well as the provinces of Nuristan, Kunar, Nangarhar, Badakhshan, etc. They keep mixed livestock herds of cattle, sheep and goats, as well as yaks in the Pamirs, mainly for subsistence.

Sedentary pastoralists are those who have transitioned to a settled lifestyle. They grow crops, vegetables and fruits, and keep some sheep, goats and cattle for their domestic purposes. They graze their animals on nearby communal rangeland. The shift to a sedentary lifestyle has been due to decades of wars, sociopolitical instability, socio-economic pressures, poverty and frequent droughts. Since the Soviet invasion in the 1980s, pastoralists have suffered tremendously. Since 2000, Afghanistan's livestock numbers are thought to have fallen by 75%, and 60% of pastoralists have lost their livestock entirely.

Former pastoralists are those who have lost their livestock, or are better-off and have permanently settled and turned to non-pastoral income sources such as trading, businesses, casual labouring and remittances. They no longer own livestock or land, but still maintain their cultural identity as Kuchi. Most are Pashtun. Some have become influential political leaders and represent the Kuchi community in Afghan politics.

Major pastoral regions

The central highlands encompass 50% of Afghanistan's total area and include the Hindu Kush region. This region contains most of the rangelands (225,000 km²), which are used by both nomadic and transhumant pastoralists for grazing. This is the home area of the Hazara tribe, who practise transhumance. This region has relatively productive pastures but a very complex tenure system; long-standing conflicts over pastures exist between Hazara and Pashtun herders.

Major pastures include the Nawur pastures in northern Ghazni, little Pamir and Shewa pastures in northeast of Badakhshan. These pastures are the summer destination for pastoralists from Kunduz, Takhar, Baghlan and Badakhshan, and are used mainly by Hazara, Arab, Pashtun, Tajik and Uzbek pastoralists. The little Pamir lies above 4,000 m above sea level, exclusively used by Afghan Kyrgyz who raise fat-tailed sheep, goats and yaks. Though exact numbers of pastoralists are difficult to determine, herd sizes per family range from 500 to 1,000 animals, with some Pashtun families owning up to 3,000 animals.



Photo: Keith Brown/dvidshub



Photo: Peter Shinn/dvidshub



Photo: Eric Lafforgue

The northern plains, covering roughly 30% of Afghanistan, stretch from the Iranian border in the west to the foothills of the Hindu Kush in the northeast. This region is part of the Central Asian steppe and is Afghanistan's main farming area. It includes Baghlan, Samangan and Faryab provinces, home to a significant proportion of Pashtun, Arab, Tajik and Uzbek migratory pastoralists. They use the lower plains and rolling hills as winter pastures, with large numbers travelling long distances to reach the highland pastures in Badakhshan for summer grazing, following the ancient Kunduz–Takhar–Badakhshan trekking route. They own mainly sheep and goats, with herds of about 120 animals per family, along with a few cattle and camels. In some areas the herders graze their livestock on crop fields after the harvest. Conflicts may arise between farmers because of crop damage by the herders' livestock. In the west, especially in Herat, some herders cross the borders into neighbouring countries.

Photo: Eric Lafforgue



The southwestern plateaus are extremely arid; they include the Registan and Dasht-e-Margo deserts and extend over the borders with Iran and Pakistan. Since ancient times, these deserts have been home to thousands of nomadic pastoralists. There are two main ethnic groups of pastoralists. Pashtun herders travel towards the central highlands in spring and back again during the winter, while Baluch herders move in the desert region bordering Pakistan and Iran. Some cross over the border into Pakistan from Kandahar and Helmand. In the Registan desert, Baluch are about 80% of the nomadic population, while Pashtun are the remaining 20%. A family has between 50 and 300 sheep and goats, plus up to 7 camels and 5 donkeys.

The eastern region includes the provinces of Nangarhar, Laghman, Nuristan, Kunar and Paktia. These are known for livestock, vegetable production and agroforestry. Both long-range nomadic and short-range transhumant systems are common in this region. The nomadic pastoralists typically reside in black goat-hair tents, reflecting their distinct cultural identity and habitation. For centuries, these nomadic pastoralists have migrated across border with Pakistan, spending the summers in the eastern highlands and plateaus of Afghanistan and the winters in warmer areas of Pakistan such as the Indus valley and parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan. These pastoralists keep mainly sheep, with 100–150 animals per flock. The transhumant system is more common in Nuristan and Kunar, where pastoralists use the higher lands as summer pastures and bottomlands

for winter grazing. They keep mainly mixed herds of sheep, goats and cattle.

The Pamir region, or the Wakhan Corridor, is known as *Bam-e-Dunya*, the “Roof of the World”. It includes the Wakhan valley and the Little and Great Pamir. The Wakhan Corridor, a narrow strip sandwiched between Pakistan, Tajikistan and China, is an important place for Kyrgyz and Wakhi pastoralists. Around 10,000 Wakhi agropastoralists follow a transhumance pattern, while some 1,400 Kyrgyz are nomadic pastoralists who live on the upper plateaus of the Pamir mountains. Both these communities herd fat-tailed sheep, goats, yak, camels, donkeys, mules and horses. The Kyrgyz in the Little and Great Pamirs are thought to keep around 20,000 sheep and goats, 4,500 yaks and 150 camels.

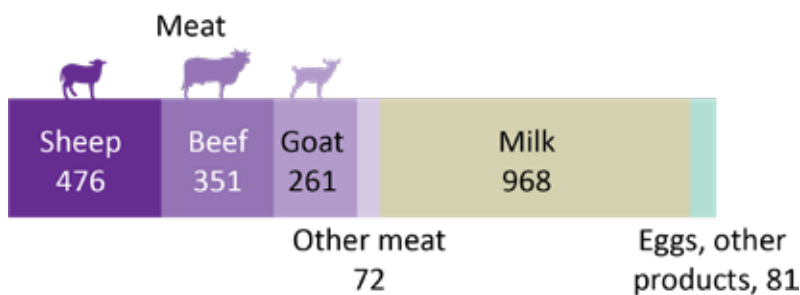
Definition and history of pastoralism

The term “Kuchi” refers broadly to all nomadic pastoralists. They live in highly fluid groups of around 11 households at a time, herding 450–600 sheep and goats along with some cattle, camels and horses, and sharing the same winter and summer grazing areas.

Historically, Afghanistan has been a hub for migratory pastoral tribes, who were often warriors and conquerors across Central and South Asia and the Middle East. Aryan tribes were among the first migrants into Afghanistan from Central Asia whose lifestyle revolved around pastoralism. Turkic and Mongol tribes invaded and settled here during the 13th century. The Pashtun Kuchi emerged as a distinct ethnic group in the 18th century. Today, the Kuchi assert that they were the first inhabitants of Afghanistan.

Socioeconomic and ecological contributions

Pastoralists consume a large portion of the meat and milk they produce themselves, and much of their output may not enter the national statistics. According to FAO data, the livestock sector as a whole contributes about one-third of Afghanistan’s agricultural gross domestic product, or about 16% of the country’s total GDP. It supports the livelihoods of around 75% of rural households. Nomadic and transhumant pastoralists supply most of the live animals and meat consumed.



Total \$2,208 million

Source: FAOSTAT, rounded figures

Value of livestock products in Afghanistan, million US\$, 2022

Milk and dairy products such as curd, buttermilk, ghee, dried milk and cheese are mainly used for home consumption, while the surplus is sold in local markets.

Worth about USD 36 million in 2023–24, livestock products make up only 2% of total exports, according to the National Statistics and Information Authority. Carpets accounted for USD 17.1 million, followed by skins (USD 8.4 million) and wool (USD 4.9 million). The pelts of young Karakul lambs are highly prized; they are used to make hats worn by men in Central and South Asia.

Kuchi pastoralists remain marginalized and vulnerable to socioeconomic, political and ecological shocks. More than half (54%) are reported to suffer from poverty, the highest of all the social groups measured. Widespread, chronic conflict over grazing rights, combined with climate change, have led to rangeland degradation and desertification. This is although pastoralism generally uses the country's vast rangelands in an efficient way, maintaining soil health and conserving biodiversity. Pastoralism also preserves the traditional knowledge, practices and cultural values that have been passed down through generations.

Data sources

Data on rangelands, pastoralists and livestock production in Afghanistan can be sourced from the academic literature, government agencies and international organizations. But the lack of accurate, up-to-date data is a challenge, and limited data are available at the provincial and lower levels and from remote and conflict-affected areas. The number of pastoralists and their livestock is unknown. What data that are available are based on rough estimates or politically motivated projections. Such factors hinder a comprehensive understanding of pastoral practices across Afghanistan.

The national livestock census of 2002–3 has details of livestock numbers by district, but did not cover the Kuchi population, and the numbers of livestock are thought to have fluctuated considerably over the years because of drought and insecurity. In 2024 FAO launched a comprehensive nationwide livestock survey that will include the Kuchi.

One of the few sources of information on the Kuchi is a 2016/17 survey of living conditions by the government's Central Statistics Organization, which classifies Afghanistan's population into urban, rural and (nomadic and semi-nomadic) Kuchi, and breaks down some statistics according to

Sources of data on pastoralism in Afghanistan

Institution	Parameters	Area covered	Years	Availability
CSO	Living conditions of Kuchi	National	2016–17	CSO 2018
FAO	Maps of livestock distribution	National	2023	FAO 2023
	National livestock census	National	2002	FAO 2006
	Land cover maps	National, provinces	2016	FAO 2016
ICIMOD	Kyrghyz and Wakhi pastoralists, yaks	Pamir region	2016	Ali et al. 2016
NSIA	Production and export of livestock products	National	2022–23	NSIA 2024
USAID	Pastoral regions, livestock production systems, livestock population	National	2005	de Weijer 2005
World Bank	Maps and data on rangelands, animal production	National	2018	World Bank 2018

these categories. This covers aspects such as gender and access to health and education services, but not the livestock management system.

Data on pastoral systems can be improved through consistent and countrywide surveys, and through research on pastoral livelihoods, socioeconomic contributions, and market scenarios. Greater collaboration between private and government organizations is needed to provide more accurate and context-specific information on pastoralists across the country.

Vision

Kuchi pastoralists are marginalized, economically disadvantaged and environmentally vulnerable due to prolonged political upheavals, conflicts and periodic droughts. Despite these challenges, a sizable proportion still sustain pastoralism as a way of life, making significant contributions to subsistence and national economies, providing inclusive livelihoods opportunities, and efficiently using marginal lands through livestock grazing. For this system to be sustained, targeted policy interventions, development programmes and adaptive strategies are needed. These should enhance the pastoralists' socio-economic and ecological contributions, ensure legislative recognition of their rights, and provide equal access to traditional pastoral lands and social and veterinary services.

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