**The virtues of open grazing in Nigeria-by Junaidu Maina**

*Hyenas urinating upwind to stampede the cattle below -African proverb*

According to a popular adage when you are in a tunnel, what you need is light, not sound. However, light at the end of the tunnel on issues relating to cattle husbandry is long time coming, given the ill-tempered and sometimes uninformed exchanges on open grazing. Self-styled experts are attempting to stampede governments to ban open grazing by advancing fictitious arguments such as: no land for roaming cattle, data on land use shows otherwise or that ranching is the global best practice for keeping cattle, while in Sub-Saharan Africa, ranches exist only in parts of Ethiopia, Kenya and South Africa and falsely claiming that ranches have replaced pastoralism in Kenya and Ethiopia, while the Maasai and the Oromos respectively, still practice pastoralism in these countries.

Examination of data on land use will illustrate the logic of open grazing. It is true that population has increased over the years, also more land has been put to farming and infrastructure, but analysis of available data shows that for 20 million cattle and 200m Nigerians, there is more than enough land. For a start Kano State one of the most densely populated state is home to about 1m cattle and there is relative tranquility. Nigeria has a land mass of 92.3m ha, with 70.8m ha of agricultural area but only 34-35m ha was cultivated last year. For sake of discussion let’s look at maize production. In 2020 only about 12m tons was produced. Research findings have shown that 86% of cereal biomass is made of materials not consumable by humans, but ruminants (cattle etc) can convert that into high quality animal protein. The implication is that over 50m tons of crop residue will be wasted if not consumed by cattle. Not to mention sorghum that accounts for 50% of total cereal production and occupies about 45% of total land area devoted to cereal production. Add to these, the millions of tons of grasses on fallow land and open range. To access these fodders which are mainly available only *in situ*, cattle must move and openly graze. In most cases this is done with the expressed permission of farmers for a fee. Cattle generally move along moisture gradients (North in the wet and south in dry season respectively) on international transhumance stock routes recognized under *usufructuary* rights. This explains why a kilo of beef sells for 1700 Naira. Therefore, until the country has a program to process these quality fodders, banning open grazing will be ‘dog in the manger’ policy. But I accept that rogue elements amongst herders engage in criminalities and the justice system has failed to prosecute them.

I also need to draw attention to a special category of pastoralists called agropastoralists. These are small scale livestock producers that settle in communities all over Nigeria. They negotiate with members of the host community for land to build their homestead, grow crops and keep cattle. During the cropping season they kraal animals away from farms. In fact, many of the animals in their herds belong to members of the host communities. Clusters of these type of producers exist in the south, along Iseyin-Igangan axis in Oyo State, in Adada-Nkpologu-Adani-Iggah axis in Enugu State and along Awgu-Nkanu-Abakaliki axis in Ebonyi State to mention a few. Some of these settlements have existed for upwards of 70 years, sequel to veterinary interventions that made it possible for cattle to stay year-round. Many of these pastoralists are law abiding, they speak the local languages, their children are in schools, their wives engage in trades and have fully integrated into the community. Consensus among livestock experts is that agropastoralism, peri-urban and urban livestock production systems account for over 90% of dairy products in Sub-Sharan Africa. These producers adopt research findings, benefit from government extension services and comply with public health regulations. A ban on open grazing will destroy this system and uproot these producers. And the reason is simply this.

A ban on open grazing literally means changing from agropastoralism to Zero grazing system cold turkey. In Zero grazing, animals are kept in stalls and fed entirely on purchased specially prepared rations to enable them to produce plenty of milk or fatten quickly. Agropastoral cows have poor productivity and live on grass and occasional crop residue.

Rule of thumb, a local cow consumes 2.5% of its body weight and consumes about 15 litres of water. The average herd size of agropastoralists is between 20-35 animals. So, for a herd of 20 cows of 200kg body weight each a herder must cut and carry 110kg of grass and source 300litres of water daily. This is an impossible task. So, a law-abiding Nigerians trying to eke out a living from cattle business has two choices, stay and lose your means of livelihood or leave town.

The term ranching is not clearly defined in this country, so all intensive or enclosed livestock production systems are categorized as ranching. However, a ranch is a very large area of rangeland that is enclosed where animals roam and openly graze. It is in view of that, the Land Use Act recommends allocation of up to 5,000 ha for livestock farming. So, if State governors genuinely believe in ranching, they should put their money where their mouth is, and allocate the recommended hectares to ranchers. The statement that states go into ranching because there is no land is incongruent. According to FAO, 33% of global land is under cultivation for animal feeds while 30% of the entire earth surface is permanently under pasture to support global intensive livestock production.

Against all odds open grazing has success story. Ethiopia has a landmass of 110m with 60m cattle, three times that of Nigeria under open grazing. Ethiopia is one of the fastest growing economies in Africa with livestock production covering 40% of agricultural output and contributing 13-16% of the total GDP.

Without any doubt cattle production is facing a myriad of challenges associated with husbandry, the misconducts of some herders, climate change and local politics. In today’s world technology is the weapon of first choice to overcome most challenges associated with livestock production. Nigeria has successfully applied genetics to produce high-yielding Day-old Chicks, hybrid seeds to increase yields of maize and soybeans for massive production of quality commercial poultry feeds and veterinary science to deliver healthcare services to poultry. Bankers eager to make a quick buck, saw the huge internal market and the Nigerian spirit of entrepreneurship and massively funded commercial poultry. Today, that industry is worth about N10 trillion (Poultry Association of Nigeria) and is the biggest in Africa. But most significantly, commercial and free-range rural poultry exist in all states thus giving commercial poultry the all-important Federal character. Poultry revolution did not just happen, it was made to happen by deliberate government policies, public-private sector partnership and the Nigerian spirit of entrepreneurship. Same technology can transform the cattle industry for the benefit of all if only Nigerians can make that conscious and deliberate political decision rather than unhelpful legislations driven my emotions.

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