

## Keynote Address: Stock theft in Africa: Current challenges and future direction

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**Keywords:** Rural Crime; stock theft, policing, Kenya, stock theft as entrepreneurial crime; rural criminology

### A Short Preface

I would like to begin by giving a special thanks to all those who worked to make possible this first International Rural Crime Conference in Africa. It gives me great pleasure and honor for being invited to be one of the key note speakers, and I have no doubt that this conference will be very interesting and rewarding. Being in this room this day was a mirage to me, as early as 2009s when I began my studies in rural communities. Today, in 2017, it is pleasure to be here in South Africa.

Based on lived and field experiences, research and teaching in Kenya, crimes happening in rural areas or affecting rural communities have always puzzled me. There is no doubt that rural communities are often subject to a range of crimes which studies and media have continuously report a dramatic increase in criminality.

Drawing from articles I have written on agricultural crime and more specifically “*From bush to butchery: Cattle rustling as an entrepreneurial process*” and “*Agricultural crime in Africa: trends and perspective*” I have noticed a dramatic change in agricultural crimes. Indisputably, throughout the world; agricultural crime is one of the biggest concern affecting the rural communities and economies in the world (Barclay 2001; Barclay, Donnermeyer, Doyle & Talary 2001; Anderson & McCall 2003; Jones 2008; Graham 2010; Bunei 2014; Bunei 2016; Bunei McElwee & Smith

2016). It has become a grim reaper of relationship among family members, neighbourhood co-existence, community cohesiveness and national economy.

Unfortunately, governments have been much less effective in averting or preventing agricultural crime. Indeed, the recognition of the centrality of agriculture to the life of rural communities makes it important to discuss agricultural crimes in this conference. It is this concern that inevitably renders this conference very critical.

### **Changing nature of Agricultural Crime in Africa**

For long time in Africa, rural communities, especially farmers, were not concerned about theft as crime rarely occurred and if it did occur, the impact was minimal. Many farmers did not lock their stores or guard their farms. Many left keys in the farm machinery and no one was concerned that their crops might be stolen or harvested without their knowledge. However, across Africa, crime against farm operations and in some cases the murder of farmers is rising (Bunei 2014; Chiwona-Kartuna *et al* 2009; Clack 2013; Foeken & Mwangi 2000 and Gichamo 2011). Criminals are descending upon rural areas in Africa to take advantage of rich pickings, a discrete environment and relatively low risk, and rural “hot products.”

Across Africa and more specifically South Africa, stock theft is a persistent problem, posing a serious threat to food security and livelihood development (Bunei *et al* 2016; Clack, 2013 Manu, Andu, Tarla, & Agharih, 2014). In Ethiopia, bean theft is a more pressing problem than soil fertility management (Gichamo 2011; Chiwona-Karlun *et al* 2009). In Kenya, green maize theft is growing concern while vanilla theft is a major problem in Uganda and Madagascar, prompting farmers to harvest before crop maturity. In Malawi, Cassava theft is a big challenge to farmers especially women, Chiwona-Karlun and Bvumbwe (2000). In Zimbabwe, theft of sheep and *moringa* (valued for its leaves and high-protein seeds for food and health benefits) is causing

farmers significant stress, both financially and psychologically (Mudiyiwa *et al* 2013; Nel & Davies, 1999). In Ghana crop theft from irrigation schemes is big concern with over 21.5 percent of dry season irrigation farmers being victim of farm thefts (Inkoom & Nanguo, (2011).

### **Livestock theft**

Of all these agricultural thefts, livestock theft is making agriculture a risk venture. Indeed, stock theft is not a new phenomenon and has been going on for thousands of years, but in recent decades, the frequency and intensity of the practice has reached uncontrollable level (Bunei *et al.*, 2016; Kaprom 2013 and Cheserek *et al* 2012). Since the 1990's, livestock theft has been soaring as illustrated by a steep graph that defies gravity.

It is a problem of concern to development in rural Africa with a serious threat to live, rural livelihoods, food security, employment options, and rural development in general (Bunei & Barasa 2017; Bunei, 2014; Bunei, Rono & Chessa 2013; Kimaiyo 2016; Dzimba & Matoone 2005). In particular, stock theft has pauperised and impoverished thousands in Africa (Kaprom 2013; KHRC 2010 and Osamba 2009). That notwithstanding, many farmers suffer in silence with some experiencing significant psychological distress. A single incidence of stock theft can mean a loss of not only the stock but also loss of time, hard work and trust.

Generally in Africa, stock means different things at different time in different place to different people. Historically, across the rural Africa and Kenya specifically, livestock is the backbone and a source of political and social influence to many rural communities (Gueye 2013 and Satya 2004). In particular, livestock are valuable assets, providing an important source of wealth, food and income, social identity, recognition, pride and status, symbol of prosperity and prestige and security against drought or other

calamities (Bunei 2014; Kaprom 2013; KHRC 2010; Opiyo et al and 2012Mkutu, 2008). As Goldschmidt (2011) observes, cattle is not merely a source of food but also a form of social capital that is important for negotiations and social investment for many rural communities.

Thus, when livestock are stolen, it becomes traumatic and threat to economic lifeline of many rural farmers. The impact tend to be more severe to small scale farmers than large scale livestock farmers who may have the financial means to rapid recovery. In the modern time, livestock has become a major source of money. Livestock have acquired a criminal purpose. Across rural Africa livestock are synonymous with criminality. Livestock is now among the major source of money for criminals who want to pursue their own selfish financial gain (Kaprom 2013).

### **Types of stock theft**

Generally, there are two types of livestock theft. The first type of stock theft occurs when a large herd of stock is stolen from grazing land. This has been referred to as cattle rustling (Anderson, 1986; Cheserek et al., 2012; Okoli & Okpaleke, 2014; and Osamba, 2000). Indeed, the term cattle rustling have evolved into a more standardized term to mean the act of stealing herd of cattle from any place notwithstanding the motivations especially bulls are targeted by a network of highly skilled, well-organized thieves well-equipped with trucks and guns, often with the knowledge of police and ready markets for stolen stock (Bunei 2014). Secondly, there is stock theft involving a few stocks. It is a one off type of theft where high quality stocks are stolen.

### **Stock theft as an organized crime**

In Africa, livestock theft has become a highly organized, commercialized, politicized, militarized, violent and vicious criminal activity. It is a big lucrative underworld business (Cheserek et al 2012; Gueye 2013, KHRC 2010 and Okoli &

Okpaleke 2014). It has typically degenerated into a commercialised criminal venture and a predatory form of crime involving a series of steps such as scouting for cattle and markets, planning, organising, aiding and protecting criminals.. In these sense, it is an organized crime involving discernible hierarchical social, economic and criminal networking and syndication (Bunei & Auya 2015; Cheserek et al, 2012; Gueye 2013; KHRC 2010; Okoli & Okpaleke 2014 and Osamba 2009). It entails

Stock theft is no longer a localized criminal issue but a syndicate involving an organized network of people that runs from “bush” (rural) to “butchery “(urban)”. It is a an illegal web of business and criminal relationships involving locals, local administrators, police, livestock traders, politicians, unscrupulous butcher owners, and transporters who are out to make a kill out of farmer’s fortunes (Clack 2010 and Olowa 2010). At the tail end of criminal network is unscrupulous business individuals who are the greatest beneficiaries.

### **The rural-urban difference**

This relative difference between rural areas and ultimately destination (urban centers) have generated highly motivated criminals who are out to take advantage of poor social economic status of rural community especially youth who are amenable to manipulation to participate in the stock theft. More often rural areas suffer from grinding poverty, unemployment, and low literacy levels of the rural communities as compared to urban areas (KHRC 2010, Opiyo et al 2012 and Osamba 2009).

The rural economy where most livestock exist is generally much lower and this generates pressure to get money as villagers try to “keep up” and increasingly seek the trappings of wealth in a global economy (for instance mobile phones, televisions, cars, motorbikes and designers clothes) through illegal ways such as stock theft. Uneducated and unemployed youths have found a new source of income and for dowry payment.

Indeed the economic returns from successful stock theft are a great incentive for poor rural household to participate in stock theft.

Coupled with social problems is rapid population growth and high urbanising and migratory population which have created a huge demand of meat. Livestock product is increasingly becoming scarce and in short in short supply, creating a rise in demand and opportunities to make a good profit. Because of the high demand of meat but with low supply; criminal opportunity has arisen. Fortunately rural areas tend to offer cheap, fresh and organically-grown livestock which are in high demand. This tends to motivates criminals to target rural areas and steal livestock. Consider this; one cattle can fetch KES 40,000 (ZAR 5,115; USD 388); if one succeeds in stealing a thousand cattle; it can fetch KES 40 million (ZAR 5.115 Million).

### **Challenges of tackling stock theft**

In dealing with the unprecedented stock theft levels, it forces us to think beyond the confines of rural areas. Challenges of policing agricultural crimes that we are discussing here cannot of course be made without considering their linkage to the other factors that support their rise. Although they have been attempts to end stock theft in Kenya such as disarmaments, negotiation and legislation; the vice still remain a growing concern. What has remained a disturbing issue has been: why is it challenging for the government to tame stock theft in Kenya and Africa in general?

The first challenge is the lack of evidence to sustain and prosecute suspect of stock theft (Bunei, Rono & Chessa 2012). In most case, prosecutors and investigators find it hard to nail a suspect due to lack of witness and definite evidence in particular proofing ownership of the stock. Although some farmers do identify their stock by use of branding and colour; this marks do not conclusively proof ownership.

Furthermore, some farmers are reluctant to report stock theft and testify against thieves in courts. This is all part of a wider issue. I once had a conversation with a farmer who had lost a cattle through theft why he did not follow-up stock theft case. The sad answer of course is that, the farmer found it costly to attend court proceedings in terms of time and money often through lengthy proceedings. Many farmers are pressured to conform, keep the peace and not to accuse someone in the community (Barclay et al, 2001: 155). It is better for farmers (victim) to stop farming and have peace with your neighbour. Great importance is placed on the strength of a united community, more especially during hard times like floods; bushfires and economic hardship. Thus, victims would rather trade out their livestock than to be subjected to exclusion from their community because of reporting crime. Although some could report and have their own children apprehended as one of the farmers did to his son, they could not press charges due to the strong social relationship between them

The second challenge is highly sophisticated criminals. Criminals syndicate involved in stock theft are increasingly becoming more organized, with significant networks. The network is organized at local, national and international level with nodes in the criminal justice system. The criminals are also highly connected and militarized. Improved transport and communication system have open rural areas for criminal connected individuals to make deals, communicate and move steal livestock. One such noble invention in Kenya is the introduction of mobile phones and mobile transfer application commonly known as Mpesa<sup>1</sup>. Stock thieves use mobile phones to negotiate, coordinate and transact stock theft activities. Indeed, stock thieves have mobile phones which are used for communication and receiving money from their network especially police and business people.

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<sup>1</sup> Kiswahili word for transfer of money through mobile. Pesa is a Kiswahili word meaning money

The fourth challenge is police incapacity and inadequate response: police who are deployed to handle stock theft cases have skills, knowledge, experience and equipment problem in terms of intelligence; morale; training, equipment and exposure. For example, some even do not even know the nature of rural areas or different breeds of cattle. In some instances; police officers are starve-off proper resources to response to stock theft events. This includes good vehicles to traverse rural areas and modern communication system. Furthermore, farmers have reported calls not being answered and a lack of understanding amongst police on rural related issues. This means that police response can often be delayed and this contributes to the fear and intimidation which rural dwellers experience. This impacts how, or even if, rural crimes are reported and therefore the overall rural crime figures.

Lastly, stock theft is laundered through illegitimate concession often through high level of corruption. In particular, police in particular have been found to be working in cohort with criminals to steal stock, especially cattle, goats and sheep. For example, because of constant interference from powerful government officials and poor investigation, several potential suspects have escaped the hook and continue to engage in stock theft with the blessing of the powerful forces in the government especially among the police, politicians and court officers. Many farmers regretted to be required to *part with "something"*<sup>2</sup> for the police to act on a reported incident and meet full cost of apprehending the suspect. This serves to add the cost of reporting on the cost of the item making reporting economically unattractive.

In Kenya, some stock thefts are politically motivated. It is used as a mechanism for mobilizing wealth and funds to reward political allies and funding campaigns.

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<sup>2</sup>*"Part with something" is a term used mostly by Kenyans to refer to bribe that is giving money for service to be provided in way that favours the recipient or be exempted from being arrested.*



Indeed, a big percentage of proceeds from the stock theft go towards funding elections. It is also a political tool to coerce, created voting blocs and support zone and intimidate opponents. That is why the stock thefts are rampant towards the elections.

### **Conclusion and future direction**

But what kind of crime prevention methods is available that can be used to tame stock theft and rural crimes in general? First, we need to take livestock identification seriously as most theft cases fall because of inability to identify stock conclusively. Indeed, if we can legally identify our livestock, we will be able to prove ownership and improve traceability.

Secondly, the governments need to rise to the challenge of constraints on criminal justice system. They should be able to provide resources to law enforcers to effectively prevent, adjudicate and disrupt stock theft syndicates such as modern technology so as to adequately combat militarized stock thieves. Investigators, prosecutors and Magistrates handling stock theft issues should have profound knowledge of livestock, livestock theft and rural. They should also be able to reduce barriers that impede farmers from effectively participating in criminal justice system such as the costs of pursuing and prosecuting stock thieves; corruption, language difficulties etc. Possibly a rural crime unit may be formed within the general police unit.

Third, we need to strategically invest in technology to fight stock theft. Social media such as *Facebook*, *Whatssup*, *Twitter* and other online tools can be fantastic methods for communicating with citizens and reporting of stock thefts. Farmers should be empowered and encouraged to register with social media technologies. One example in Kenya is tweeting chief who has been able to combat crimes including stock theft. We should also think of creating a website to enable all law enforcement agencies to

contribute intelligence data. These simple messages that are instantly uploaded to many people at the same time can raise alert to people of stock theft that has occurred. This social media groups should also incorporate slaughterhouse personnel, police, local administrators etc.

Fourth, tightening security checks at our slaughter house and livestock movement may dissuade, scare and discourage offenders from taking advantage of situations. This will make stock theft a useless economic venture.

Fifth, we need to enhance research and intelligence on livestock theft. This information gathered through intelligence and scholarly research such as causes of stock theft, changing dynamics of stock theft, perpetrators of stock theft, risk factors; financial and communication trails between OCGs may help in devising new ways of combating stock theft.

Sixth, a salient feature of the more successful sustainable stock theft prevention strategy is to have a close and concerted partnership-based collaboration, interaction and information exchange. The integrated approach should include a number of stakeholders such as farmers, law enforcers, business communities; different government institutions and research institutions. Farmers should be ready to work proactively with their neighbours, community and the police. It is essential that law enforcement forces collaborate to deal with all stock theft thieves consistently. This principle of an integrated approach is maintained at both community and national levels.

Seven, we need to empower the youth and the most disadvantaged in the rural areas that include the creation of employment opportunities for the youth and the

vulnerable, improving basic technical skills and provision of affordable middle level education.

Lastly, governments, law enforcers and farmers should treat livestock theft as a serious criminal activity and that all those who carryout or support should face the force of the law. I congratulate all those involved in this first ever conference on rural crime in Africa and once again thank you for inviting me to this first international rural crime conference.

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