

Cattle Theft and Recovery Challenges along South Africa's borders: A Case Study of North-West Province

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ABSTRACT

Livestock theft, particularly cattle, has emerged as a persistent issue along the borders of South Africa, undermining agricultural productivity, economic stability, and the livelihoods of rural communities. Despite the implementation of various legal frameworks aimed at mitigating theft and aiding the recovery of stolen livestock, significant challenges persist, especially with the facilitation of cross-border movement by thieves and stolen cattle. This manuscript explores the systemic barriers to effective cattle recovery. It focuses on the role of livestock passports, and provides an in-depth case study of North-West Province, where theft is particularly rampant. We examine the dynamics of livestock theft, the legal and logistical hurdles in recovering stolen cattle, and the socio-economic impacts on the affected communities. Key recommendations are proposed to strengthen security mechanisms and improve the effectiveness of recovery systems.

Keywords: Cattle recovery, Cross-border crime, Livestock identification, Livestock theft, Rural communities, South Africa borders

INTRODUCTION

Livestock theft, particularly the theft of cattle, has grown to be a major socio-economic concern in South Africa, especially along its leaky borders. Mabunda et al. (2021) concur with this sentiment by indicating the high level of stock theft since the democratic government opening of borders to South Africa's neighbouring countries. South Africa shares its borders with five neighbouring countries: Botswana, Lesotho, Mozambique, Namibia, and Zimbabwe. The movement of stolen cattle across these borders, coupled with the illegal trade in livestock, presents unique challenges to law enforcement and agricultural authorities. In regions such as North-West Province, as Breetzke et al. (2023) highlights, cattle theft has a devastating impact on the local economy and food security, because livestock play a critical role in most rural livelihoods. Molokoe (2000) states that the North-West Province has generated almost no employment opportunities since the collapse of the former Bophuthatswana homeland. The former homeland, on the other hand, could employ every graduate, matriculants, junior secondary school leavers and even unskilled workers because of the factories it had all over (Manson & Mbenga, 2017; Van der

Merwe, 2017). Moreover, the laws that protected locals from stock theft, and that were able to protect the neighbouring Botswana people from possible theft by North-West people and the from South Africans in the neighbourhood, have collapsed and left vulnerability for livestock farmers in the province of North-West (Letlape, 2021).

Despite legislative measures such as the Livestock Identification and Traceability System (LITS) and the requirement of livestock passports for legal movement, the enforcement of these regulations remains weak. This study highlights the challenges associated with cattle theft and recovery. It focuses on the limitations of the passport system and the ease with which thieves bypass these controls. LITS are essential frameworks for monitoring and tracking livestock throughout the supply chain (Kampan et al., 2022). Edmans et al. (2024) explain that LITS ensure that each animal can be traced back to its origin. According to Kumar et al. (2024) and Mandimby et al. (2024), key components of LITS include unique animal identification (such as ear tags or microchips), premises identification for locations where animals are kept, and tracking animal movements between premises. These systems are crucial for protecting animal health by enabling quick responses during disease outbreaks. They ensure food safety through quick recalls of contaminated products. They also support public health by preventing zoonotic diseases. Regulatory frameworks in countries such as Canada and the U.S. mandate compliance from livestock producers, while modern technologies such as electronic identification (EID) and software solutions enhance data management (Fassnacht et al., 2024; Morten et al., 2024). A recent initiative by Free State Agriculture in South Africa exemplifies this approach, as they developed an animal identification and movement system (AIMS) to improve traceability following a foot-and-mouth disease outbreak (Mlombo & Mlombo, 2020; Yadav et al., 2019). LITS play a vital role in maintaining the integrity of the livestock industry, safeguarding animal health, protecting consumers, and promoting agricultural sustainability.

The Scope and Nature of Livestock Theft

Extent of the Problem in North-West Province

North-West Province is one of the areas most affected by cattle theft in South Africa. The province, with its vast rural areas, relies heavily on livestock farming, particularly cattle. In 2020, reports indicated that cattle theft accounted for a significant portion of overall livestock-related crimes in the region, with farmers often reporting losses in the hundreds of thousands of rands. Factors such as the remoteness of farming communities, inadequate law enforcement presence, and poor infrastructure make the recovery of stolen cattle particularly difficult.

Methods of Theft

Thieves employ a variety of methods to steal cattle (Aiyzhy et al., 2021). Meyerson (2024) intimate that these methods range from outright theft of animals from grazing fields to more sophisticated tactics involving forged documentation. Cattle are often sold across the border, and some are stolen by cross-border thieves illegally crossing to steal and back, without properly crossing the borders with the stolen stock (Aerni-Flessner et al., 2021; Matanzima, 2024). Mphaga et al. (2024), van Dam et al. (2024) and other researchers consider such selling of cattle across borders as where weak enforcement of South African livestock identification laws allows the cattle to be re-registered and sold in the neighbouring country. According to Holt et al. (2022), the use of livestock passports, intended to trace and verify ownership, is often bypassed due to a lack of enforcement and counterfeit practices. Ovuru et al. (2024) mentioned that cattle may also be slaughtered illegally and sold as meat. This further complicates the recovery process.

Legal and Logistical Barriers to Cattle Recovery

Livestock Identification and Traceability System (LITS)

Over the years cattle were marked to ensure identification and to counter the evolution of cattle during growth, even when identification may be obscured. The theft of livestock has made it more necessary to mark livestock. The LITS system was developed to assist in tracing the ownership and movement of livestock through a national database (George et al., 2021). According to Utami et al. (2024), the system requires farmers to register their cattle and use livestock passports for movement. However, the system faces significant challenges in terms of implementation and enforcement. According to Balzani and Hanlon (2020), many farmers do not register their livestock because of being unaware of the requirements or due to financial restrictions. Moreover, Mack et al. (2024), the system is not universally adopted across rural areas. Malik et al. (2024) concur that many rural regions still experience poor connectivity and limited access to registration facilities.

Cross-Border Challenges

Thieves may cross borders with no permits and return with stolen stock back into their countries and become 'legal' again in their countries. Farmers cannot cross the borders to collect their stolen cattle without proper permits such as passports or even visa in the case of Mozambique, even when they are just a few metres away from their home side (Liberti, 2013). Wherever they do so, it is illegal. However, it seems reckless and sometimes deliberate that law enforcers let loose these crimes for the benefit of thieves and to the detriment of the cattle owners (Price & Price, 2018). Consequently, the ease with which cattle thieves can transfer stolen cattle across the border poses a major difficulty in recovery efforts. Dudoignon (2024) informs that livestock passports that should be checked at border posts, are not always thoroughly inspected. Further, Robinson (2024) cites bribery, corruption, and sloppy enforcement in border areas as further facilitating the illegal movement of cattle. Accordingly, once the cattle are transferred to neighbouring countries, the documentation is often falsified or altered. This complicates matters and makes it challenging to prove ownership when attempts to recover the stolen animals are underway.

Weak Law Enforcement and Capacity Limitations

People of the former Bophuthatswana homeland did not seem to have livestock theft problems to the high magnitude being experienced under the current democracy (Kreigler & Shaw, 2016). In the case of the North-West Province, an area in the geographical location formerly called Bophuthatswana, Munro (2018) states that law enforcement agencies are often stretched thin. According to Clack and Minnaar (2018), the province has limited resources to investigate and apprehend cattle thieves. The claim of "the province has limited resources . . ." may not be entirely true, as the resources of service delivery for the provinces and the entire country were at some point misappropriated due to corruption and state capture (Clack & Minnaar, 2018). Rural police stations face significant challenges in coordinating with other provinces and neighbouring countries. Mlambo et al. (2022) claim that this is due to limited intergovernmental communication and cooperation. Moreover, other major factors that further delay response times and the overall effectiveness of law enforcement on stock theft are the remoteness of rural farms and the lack of transport infrastructure (Donnermeyer et al., 2016).

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT ON RURAL COMMUNITIES

Loss of Livelihoods

The North-West Province is home to Batswana, who have been farmers and boasting livestock and crops, with cattle as their indigenous currency (Horak et al., 2018). The Afrikaners (termed '*boers*' to mean farmers) have also been prolific farmers in both crop and livestock farming for many years, in areas (Labuschagne, 2024). For many families in the North-West Province, based on this background, cattle represent a significant portion of their wealth and means of subsistence. As a result, cattle theft leads to immediate financial losses, particularly for the North-West Province. It also undermines long-term food security, because many families depend on livestock for milk, meat, and breeding. The theft of cattle is likely going to set off a chain reaction. It will leave many farmers in debt and at risk of losing their farms (Chapoto & Aboagye, 2017).

Disruption of Local Agricultural Practices

Meat and milk are consumed throughout the year, and therefore cattle farming and business where cattle are needed work all-year round (Sundrum, 2024). This makes the cattle-based businesses to be continuous businesses. Therefore, cattle theft disrupts the continuity of farming activities, with farmers often having to divert resources to deal with theft incidents. This then leaves less capital for farm improvements or purchasing more livestock. It also impacts negatively on agricultural productivity by limiting the ability of farmers to contribute to the local and national economy. It also erodes trust within communities, as farmers become more wary of sharing resources or working collaboratively.

CASE STUDY: NORTH-WEST PROVINCE

Overview of the Region

North-West Province that borders with Botswana, is described by its largely rural and agricultural landscape. The province is a vital region for cattle farming (Gaanakgomo, 2015; Motiang, 2017). It has a significant cattle population, with farming communities spread across vast distances. It features basic areas such as the Mopeane-Rustenburg District, Bojanala Platinum District Municipality, Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati District, Ngaka Modiri Molema District, and Kenneth Kaunda District Municipality. This province is home to approximately 1.6 million beef cattle, accounting for about 12% of South Africa's total herd, with major breeds including Simmental,

Brahman, and Bonsmara (Makina et al., 2016). Labuschagne (2018) explains that the region's diverse climatic conditions support extensive livestock farming. This is particularly factual for the drier conditions of western areas of the province that are conducive for large beef herds and game ranching. Cattle farming significantly impacts the local economy by providing employment and contributing to food security. This makes these border areas fundamental for both agricultural productivity and economic development in the province.

Despite these cattle-friendly conditions that the region displays, cattle farming potential, and the actual activities of cattle farming have had its share of serious challenges. Maluleke et al. (2016) indicate that among the leading challenges, cattle theft is severe. Key areas affected by cattle theft include Mahikeng, Rustenburg, and the rural outskirts of Klerksdorp (Clack, 2018). These regions suffer from high levels of poverty, unemployment, and insufficient infrastructure. These three problems seem to worsen the problem of livestock theft.

Unique Challenges for the North-West Province

The challenges that the North-West Province experiences in addressing cattle theft are extremely complex (Majaha, 2023). Mazibuko (2013) enlightens that these challenges are rooted in both geographical and socio-cultural factors. The region's rural nature, marked by sizable distances and geographical isolation, severely hampers farmers' ability to monitor and secure their cattle effectively and save them from thieves (Madibo, 2017). Since many farming areas of the province are difficult to access, it complicates routine checks and response times. This, therefore, increases vulnerability to theft. Also, the province struggles with inadequate infrastructure. There are particularly poor or even impassable road networks (Benett, 2024). These problems deter farmers' access to essential services and even delay the reporting of crimes and the progress of investigations. Motswakae (2023) adds that the stated inadequacy of infrastructure is intensified by limited access to government services. This further worsens the situation, as they obstruct timely responses and effective law enforcement. In addition, cultural factors play a significant role in the persistence of cattle theft (Marble, 2024). For example, Baloyi, (2024) explains that some community members are influenced by social ties while others fear vengeance. This results in many observers desisting from reporting theft while others may even protect the perpetrators (Salzman, 2024). These entangled issues create a complex environment where both farmers and law enforcement face substantial obstacles in combating cattle theft effectively. In general therefore, these worsen the lack of security in the region.

Efforts to Combat Cattle Theft

Due to the problem of cattle theft, numerous schemes were introduced in the North-West Province to reduce cattle theft, which include increased patrols, improved border enforcement, and public awareness campaigns (Senne, 2022). Despite these efforts, the success of these initiatives has been limited, largely due to logistical challenges and inadequate enforcement mechanisms that hinder their effectiveness (Nkadimeng, 2022). Additionally, while collaborative efforts with neighboring countries, including enhanced coordination with border authorities, have been initiated to address cross-border cattle theft, these measures have not sufficiently tackled the broader systemic issues that allow cattle to be smuggled across borders undetected (Maluleke & Dlamini, 2020). These persistent challenges suggest that more comprehensive and integrated solutions, involving both local and international stakeholders, are necessary to curb cattle theft in the region effectively.

Implications for Practice

Addressing cattle theft in this province requires a dynamic approach that mixes tough enforcement of livestock traceability systems, improved border security, robust community engagement, infrastructure development, and socio-economic support. It is hoped that implementing these strategies will reduce cattle theft, protect livelihoods, and promote agricultural sustainability in the region. The implications for practice (IFPs) drawn from the study of cattle theft in South Africa, particularly in the North-West Province, can be summarized in the following key areas:

Strengthening Livestock Identification and Traceability Systems (LITS)

IFP 1. Implementation of LITS

The LITS should be more strictly enforced: ensure registration of all cattle, and livestock passports need to be rigorously checked at borders. There should be enhanced awareness campaigns and training for farmers about LITS requirements to improve compliance. LITS should be made more universally adopted.

Improved Enforcement

The government and relevant authorities need to boost enforcement efforts by deploying more resources to border posts and rural areas, ensuring that livestock movement is properly monitored and fraudulent practices like counterfeit documents are minimized.

Enhanced Cross-Border Cooperation

IFP 2. Collaboration with Neighboring Countries

Given that cattle theft often involves cross-border activity, stronger collaboration between South African authorities and those of neighboring countries like Botswana and Namibia should be initiated. This should cover shared intelligence, joint patrols, and agreements to monitor livestock movement across borders, checking and verifying proper documentation.

Addressing Corruption and Weak Enforcement

Bribery and corruption at border posts should be tackled: stricter surveillance, improved training for border officials, and accountability measures, check stock in transit and arrest in case of stolen livestock at the borders.

Improving Law Enforcement and Infrastructure

IFP 3. Resource Allocation and Capacity Building

Law enforcement agencies should be funded and resourced adequately, and training to respond more effectively to livestock theft: Improving coordination between local, provincial, and national police forces and ensuring timely investigations.

Infrastructure Development

Infrastructure gaps should be addressed: improve roads and communication systems, enable faster response times from both law enforcement and farmers, help monitor livestock more effectively and report incidents faster.

Community Engagement and Support

IFP 4. Public Awareness and Involvement

Addressing cattle theft requires community engagement: public awareness campaigns, urge local farmers and residents to report suspicious activities, strengthening local community policing forums, establish close ties between farmers and law enforcement for cooperative environment.

Incentivizing Reporting

Creating incentives for reporting theft and criminal activity without fear of retaliation: use anonymous tip lines or financial rewards to help break the cycle of silence.

Address Socio-Economic Factors

IFP 5. Supporting Livelihoods

Cattle theft directly impacts the livelihoods of many rural families, hence address the broader socio-economic issues: unemployment and poverty, programs generating alternative income sources for communities involved in cattle theft.

Economic Support for Affected Farmers

Farmers victimized through losses from theft should receive economic support: insurance schemes, government subsidies, to help them recover from the financial blow and alleviate the long-term impact on their businesses.

Technology Integration

IFP 6. Use of Modern Technology

Integrate advanced technologies: GPS tracking, drones, and EID of livestock to monitor and provide security of farmers, integrated system to track cattle from birth to market, and ensure cattle movement that is transparent and traceable.

Data Management Systems

Investment in technology to enhance data management: ease tracking of livestock, identity, and determine theft trends or patterns.

Long-Term Policy Solutions

IFP 7. Legislative Reforms

A need for stronger and more comprehensive legislation: addresses livestock theft and broad issues of border security, law enforcement coordination, and community involvement, harsh offender penalties, and clear legal frameworks for cross-border cattle recovery.

Collaboration with Agricultural Stakeholders

Agricultural stakeholders, including farming cooperatives, should be engaged in policymaking and enforcement, as they have firsthand experience of the challenges faced by farmers and can provide valuable insights into practical solutions

Recommendations for Improving Cattle Recovery

Strengthening Livestock Identification and Documentation

Law enforcement should enhancing implement the LITS system by providing farmers with better access to registration facilities and ensuring that all livestock are properly identified to help prevent cattle theft. In addition, stronger penalties for fraudulent documentation should be imposed, and more robust checks at border posts should be implemented.

Enhanced Cross-Border Collaboration

South Africa, mainly North-West Province, should work closely with its neighbouring countries to establish joint task forces that focus on livestock theft and recovery. These task forces should be equipped with the necessary resources and authority to conduct cross-border investigations and track stolen cattle across regions.

Improved Infrastructure and Law Enforcement

The North-West should invest in infrastructure, particularly in rural areas, to facilitate faster responses to cattle theft incidents. There should be improved communication and coordination between local law enforcement agencies, farmers, and government officials to ensure timely interventions. Specialized units focusing on livestock theft should be created to address the unique challenges posed by cattle theft.

Community Engagement and Awareness

Local communities should be engaged through awareness campaigns and creation of incentives for reporting theft to reduce cattle theft incidence. Trust should be built between law enforcement and rural communities to ensure effective crime reporting and collaboration.

Addressing Socio-Economic Factors

To effectively address cattle theft, North-West's agriculture should implement targeted programs that support the livelihoods of rural communities affected by this crime. This includes providing alternative income sources for

individuals and communities involved in or at risk of engaging in cattle theft, to help in reducing the socio-economic drivers behind such activities. Additionally, economic support mechanisms, such as insurance schemes and government subsidies, should be established for farmers who suffer from theft-related losses. These initiatives would help farmers recover from the theft-caused financial setbacks, while also strengthening the long-term resilience of their businesses.

Technology Integration

The province should prioritize the integration of modern technologies, such as GPS tracking, drones, and EID systems, to enhance livestock monitoring and farmer security. These technologies could form part of a comprehensive system that tracks cattle from birth to market, ensuring their movement is transparent and traceable. Also, investing in advanced data management systems would allow authorities to effectively monitor livestock movements, identify patterns in theft, and proactively prevent crimes.

Long-Term Policy Solutions

The province should enact stronger and more comprehensive legislation that addresses livestock theft and broader issues such as border security, law enforcement coordination, and community involvement. This should include stricter penalties for offenders and establish clearer legal frameworks for cross-border cattle recovery. Moreover, agricultural stakeholders, including farming cooperatives, should be actively engaged in policymaking and enforcement.

CONCLUSION

Cattle theft along South Africa's borders, particularly in North-West Province, pose a significant challenge to both the agricultural sector and rural communities. While legal frameworks such as the Livestock Identification and Traceability System have been introduced to address these issues, significant barriers remain, including inadequate enforcement, cross-border movement of stolen cattle, and weak law enforcement. Use of a multifaceted approach involving stronger legislation, improved infrastructure, cross-border cooperation, and community engagement may be essential in addressing these challenges. Critical steps are needed toward reducing livestock theft and ensuring the recovery of stolen cattle.

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