

Livestock Theft Destroys Rural Livelihoods

By Viwe Mazwana

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KwaBhaca (previously known as Mount Frere) is a small rural town tucked away in the Alfred Nzo District Municipality in the Eastern Cape. For generations, the people of KwaBhaca have lived off the land. Livestock farming has never been a luxury in this town; it has always been a means of survival and a source of hope. Keeping cattle, goats, and sheep is not only essential for food, but also provides income, through which families sell livestock to pay for their children's education, settle household bills, and sustain their livelihoods.

Today, that way of life is being destroyed. Livestock theft in KwaBhaca has reached crisis levels. What was once isolated criminal activity has evolved into organised crime. Families are regularly robbed of their livelihoods, and poverty is deepening as a result. Community members have marched, held meetings, and pleaded with authorities to intervene. Yet, to this day, livestock theft continues. Animals disappear overnight, and the silence that follows is devastating.

In areas such as Dangwane in KwaBhaca, elders speak with deep pain about the loss of their livestock.

"We remember when the fields were alive, packed with animals grazing freely, and families confident that tomorrow would be better. Today, those same fields are empty," said Siphwe Ndlela.

The harsh reality is that many people treat livestock as a form of retirement investment. After retiring, they purchase livestock and settle down, watching their herds grow over time. When this type of crime occurs, it leaves these individuals devastated and helpless after years of careful planning and investment. Some have lost their entire herds in a single night, with years of hard work wiped out instantly.

"We witnessed a family losing 175 sheep – everything taken in one night. For many households, losing their livestock meant losing everything they had. Even the few families who still have livestock now live in fear and uncertainty," explained Sandile Hinana. What makes this situation even more painful is the profound sense of abandonment felt within the community. Residents feel neglected by the authorities meant to protect them in the ordinary course of governance. Police responses are slow, while arrests and successful prosecutions remain rare. This lack of accountability emboldens criminals and deepens the suffering of ordinary people.

South Africa, particularly the Eastern Cape government, cannot remain silent while rural communities are slowly destroyed and their primary sources of livelihood are illegally taken by criminal syndicates. The people of KwaBhaca deserve safety, justice, and meaningful support. They deserve effective and visible policing, thorough investigations, and genuine engagement with law enforcement.

This is a call for action, solidarity, and urgent intervention.

Names in this article have been changed to protect identities.

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