



Deutscher Tropentag, October 8-10, 2003, Göttingen

“Technological and Institutional Innovations
for Sustainable Rural Development”

Small Ruminants and Livelihood of Poor Rural People in Southern Benin

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Abstract

The majority of the human population in Southern Benin live in rural area, where they eke out their living from very small plots of land. They have very limited regular off-farm opportunities and lack access to credit from formal source. At the household level, they are also faced with consumption and income shocks. That leads to low investment in their agricultural activities, and consequently, to land degradation, to low productivity and income, causing a vicious circle of poverty. Previous studies indicated that small ruminants are raised in many households and this despite the presence of trypanosomes, which are a serious constraint to the development of livestock production. Biological, cultural and environmental arguments have been advanced for conserving these local genetic resources. However, the question is whether the conservation option fits with keeper's perspective. There is thus a need to better understand the roles of these animal genetic resources in the livelihood strategies of people that keep them. Between November 2001 and April 2002, a field survey was conducted in 240 randomly chosen rural households. The results indicate that 78 % of households keep small ruminants. Within household, animals are individually owned and managed by household's members. The characterisation of people that are more likely to be owners shows that they have no access to credit from formal source, are relatively young and have no regular off-farm employment. More than 85 % of the off-takes are sold. The motivation for the sale are mainly to purchase foodstuffs and clothes (36 %), to finance farm and other subsidiary activities (22 %) and to pay school and training fees for children (12 %). Through kinship networks termed as care taking, small ruminants are also used to build social capital. Despite considerable variation between flocks, gross margin per annualised breeding female reaches 56,300 FCFA^a for sheep and 38,600 for goats. Giving that the absolute poverty line in the area is estimated to be 56,000 FCFA, keeping two to three breeding females of goats and/or sheep mitigates rural poverty. Improving flock productivity would be one option to conserve the small ruminant genetic resource through intensification of utilisation.

^a655 FCFA = 1 €

Keywords: Small ruminants, animal genetic resources, rural people, poverty, livelihood, Southern Benin