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## The Village Chicken Production System and the Contribution of Chickens to Household Livelihoods in a Smallholder Farming Community of Zimbabwe

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### Abstract

Participatory rural appraisal (PRA) supported by checklists and intensive case studies on individual households, were carried out in three villages of Rushinga District in Zimbabwe. The chicken production system in each village was described and the problems discussed. Role of chickens in the livelihoods of households was evaluated. Flock dynamics were monitored monthly from March 2001 to February 2003. Nineteen percent of the households were headed by females who were resident on the farm. Over 80 percent of male heads of households were resident on the farm. A household was, on average,  $4.8 \pm 2.5$  members with an arable land of approximately 2.6 ha per household. In addition to chickens, households produced maize, cotton and sunflower and kept large animals. The production systems followed were mainly low-input and smallscale, with 1 to 50 village chickens per household, reared under a scavenging system of management with sub-optimal housing, inadequate feeding and health care. The use of ethno-veterinary medicine was common in treating sick chickens. Highest flock sizes ( $p < 0.05$ ) were observed in the hot-wet season. Over 90 percent of an average of 5.4 entries per household per month, were hatched chicks. Mortality claimed an average of 80 percent of the total exits. Chicken production potential (CPP), which defined the proportion of chickens that could be utilised by household averaged 50 percent. Chicken production efficiency (CPE), was approximately 15 percent of the CPP. Egg consumption patterns were low and similar across seasons. The low CPE could be attributed to low productivity, high transaction costs and the multi-functions of village chickens in smallholder farming communities.

**Keywords:** Constraints, dynamics, management, socio-economic roles, village chickens