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Challenges for Herders in Mongolia

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Abstract

Pastoral livestock production is a major sector of Mongolia's economy. Livestock became the only livelihood basis for rural households when the economic transition started in the early 1990s. At that time, many people took up herding as the only way out of poverty. Today, livestock provides the direct basis of livelihood for about one third of Mongolia's population.

Livestock numbers increased since the early 1990s reaching about 30.2 million head by the year 2000. Subsequently, three consecutive extremely harsh winter conditions (dzud), preceded by uncommon droughts, occurred during 2000 to 2003 and killed about 11 million head livestock, with small herders being hit most. The large outbreak of foot and mouth disease has further eroded the economic basis of the herding community and the country's economy.

Living in a very harsh climate, characterized by extremely cold winters and dry summers, Mongolian herders have developed a nomadic lifestyle, as the most effective response to the ecological conditions, and to efficiently use the vast pastoral resources. Over centuries, herders have developed hardy breeds of Bactrian camel, cattle, yak, sheep, goat and horses that have adapted particularly well to the extreme climate and scarce feed resources. Livestock products are of excellent quality, of which the most famous is Cashmere. However, production levels are low and marketing of livestock products is limping.

The present paper will discuss the major characteristics of Mongolia's livestock production and its current problems. The challenge of Mongolian herders is to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the new market economy. This will involve a drastic change in the current mind-set of the herders as well as the enhancement of both business and technical skills. At the level of the herder's camp, these changes will require an integrated approach including co-managed grazing resources, breed improvement and marketing of livestock produce. Scientists are challenged to provide practical solutions to both the Government of Mongolia and international donors like IFAD in order to address the multiple problems of Mongolia's herding sector.

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