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Securing Pastoral Livelihoods through Support for Sheep Production in Rajasthan, India

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Abstract

Sheep breeding is the traditional livelihood strategy of ten thousands of pastoralists inhabiting the drought-prone state of Rajasthan in Western India. Until the mid 1990s, sheep husbandry represented a fairly attractive economic option, generating income from wool, mutton, and dung. In recent years the situation has changed to the worse, mostly due to macro-economic developments, such as a global oversupply of wool that is depressing prices, and a series of droughts undermining demand for dung. A three-year project that conforms to the criteria of “People-Centred Livestock Development” (PCLD) was initiated in 2003, with the goal of improving economic returns from sheep breeding and thereby maintaining it as a viable livelihood option for Raika pastoralists. In a participatory process, four aspects of the sheep husbandry system were identified for possible interventions: disease control, breeding, marketing, and access to grazing and feed resources. Two years into the project, the following conclusions can be drawn: with respect to breeding and local marketing, the sheep breeders have already arrived at optimal solutions, and it is difficult to conceive any improvements. Disease control and access to grazing have emerged as the sectors where the project sees a potential for removing the systemic constraints. Improved disease control is approached by offering vaccinations against sheep pox, FMD, and other diseases, as well as teaching herd owners how to distinguish between genuine and fake medicines available on the market. The grazing problems are more difficult, but even more crucial, to tackle: sheep breeders have resolved to take legal action in order to regain their ancestral grazing rights that have been impinged upon by a wildlife sanctuary. The project results support the conclusions of a study produced by the FAO’s Pro-Poor Livestock Policy Facility that renders the organisational strengthening of livestock keepers and of building strong associations as most promising and crucial strategy for improving the livelihoods of marginal livestock keepers. This inference has several noteworthy implications for the orientation of livestock research that claims to help marginalised people.

Keywords: Disease control, grazing rights, India, livestock keepers’ associations, pastoralists, Endogenous livestock development, Rajasthan, sheep