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The LIFE-Method: A People-Centred Conceptual and Methodological Approach to the Documentation of Animal Genetic Resources

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Abstract

Comprehensive documentation of existing livestock breeds is a prerequisite for measures aimed at the sustainable use and conservation of domestic animal diversity. Appropriate conservation policies can only be developed, if the social, cultural and production contexts of livestock breeds are fully understood. Conventional documentation methods focus on population, phenotypic and production characteristics, and are based mostly on quantitative data and measurements. By looking at a breed from an outsider's or scientist's perspective they neglect to consider the priorities and concepts of its keepers and do not grasp the livelihood contribution of a breed that goes beyond production of quantifiable outputs. The resulting information therefore does not reflect the situation from the perspective of the farmer for whom cash products are often of secondary importance. Especially in marginal and remote areas, breeds generate an array of benefits that are more difficult to grasp and quantify than outputs of meat, milk, eggs, and wool. These include their contribution to social cohesion and identity, their fulfilment of ritual and religious needs, their role in nutrient recycling and as providers of energy, and their capacity to act as savings bank and insurance against droughts and other natural calamities. The LIFE-method was developed by a group of NGOs in India in order to document breeds from a people-centred perspective. It captures important characteristics of traditional breeds that were previously ignored and records breeds based on the knowledge, concepts and priorities of the associated communities. Most significantly, it comprehends breeds as products of social networks. This approach consists of a conceptual framework and employs “participatory” methods, instead of pre-determined forms. It has been tested with large animals, such as cattle, buffalo, and sheep, and mainly in pastoral contexts. This paper will present several examples of information collected by this new methodological approach.

Keywords: Animal genetic resources, participatory methods, livelihoods, documentation, sustainable use