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Direct Involvement of Indigenous Women in Sheep Improvement Research in Chiapas, México

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Abstract

In developing countries, animal extension approaches utilise the introduction of exotic genes as the basis for crossbreeding interventions. Most of these efforts end up failing due to lack of adaptation of the high-performance breeds. In Highland Chiapas, the Tzotzil ethnic group derives up to 36 % of its income from sheep husbandry and the weaving of typical woolen clothes; government efforts have attempted to absorb the local wool sheep with high-producing breeds such as the Merino, without success.

A different approach tried to improve fleece quality in Chiapas sheep by selection, and a research project was designed utilising an open nucleus scheme. Commercial or industrial traits of high-quality wool (white, short, fine) were exactly the opposite of those developed by the local weavers (coloured, coarse, double-coated, long). To account for the difference groups of Tzotzil shepherdesses and weavers were invited in 1996 to collaborate as part of the sheep-improvement plan, directing research goals by means of their continuous assessment of fleece-quality in the animals of the nucleus flock. This collaboration is put into practice by grading the quality of the fleece in all sheep under 24 months of age, prior to each six-monthly shearing.

The list of achievements in the first 10 years of this unique inter-ethnic collaboration includes a set of selection objectives for fleece quality, and a comprehensive understanding of the characteristics of wool in the local sheep and its relationship with the transformation of wool into clothes through the ancient textile process utilised over centuries by the Tzotzil women. As a result, current fleece variables within the improvement programme include: fleece quality, staple length, textile aptitude (proportion of coarse/fine fibers), greasy fleece weight, and wool growth. Improved rams from the nucleus flock have been introduced within community flocks, and their offspring have inherited superior fleece-quality traits. Direct participation in the programme by the local experts in sheep husbandry and weaving, has been a key issue in the success of this endogenous research approach.

Keywords: Endogenous livestock development, fleece quality, Tzotzil shepherdesses