



Tropentag, October 7-9, 2008, Hohenheim

“Competition for Resources in a Changing World:
New Drive for Rural Development”

Does the Future Hold for Transhumance Cattle Production System in North Western Ethiopia?

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Abstract

This study was conducted in three highland (Chilga, Dembia, Gondar Zuria) districts that practice transhumance and one lowland (Metema) district that receives the transhumance in North Gondar Zone, Amhara Region, Ethiopia. The objectives were to characterise the rainy season transhumance cattle production system, assess the constraints and forward suggestions for future interventions. In the highlands, the mean family size per household was 7.4 ± 0.17 and 42.2% of the household heads were illiterate. The average land and cattle holdings per household were 2.2 ± 0.18 ha and 8.7 ± 0.48 heads, respectively. The proportion of households that practice transhumance was 91.7% in Chilga, 77.6% in Dembia and 55.2% in Gondar Zuria. Metema was the preferred destination for 84% of the respondents due to availability of good quality feed. Movement to the lowlands commences in May (69.5%) and June (29.6%), and depends on availability of feed and labour and cattle holdings. About 60% of the cattle are trekked to the lowlands during the rainy season. Herder groups are formed among relatives and neighbours at village level to optimise labour use and protection against theft. The average herd size per herder group was 58.8 ± 3.88 . The transhumance return back home in October (45.8%) and September (35.9%), and the major triggering factors are high temperature (43.0%), availability of crop aftermath in the highlands (25.1%) and high infestation of flies in the lowlands (10.6%). The major constraints identified and prioritised by the transhumance highlanders were conflict with the lowlanders, theft, human and livestock diseases, lack of markets. Most of the respondents (86.3%) estimated that the trend of transhumance has been increasing due to feed shortage (50.4%), expansion of crop cultivation (27.4%) and increasing human and cattle population (21.2%) in the highlands. Human population has been increasing both in the highlands and lowlands and the current development of infrastructure in the lowlands (tarmac road, electricity, phone, etc) will further encourage more migration to the lowlands. The conflict over resources will intensify, probably leading to the demise of this production system unless alternative development strategies are devised.

Keywords: Cattle, Ethiopia, transhumance