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Hopes and Threats for Successful Rural Livelihoods: The Role of Social Capital among Small-scale Goat Farmers in Central Mexico

DAVID OSEGUERA-MONTIEL¹, NICOLA MARIA KEILBACH-BAER²

¹Wageningen University, Animal Production Systems Group, The Netherlands

²Colegio of Michoacán, Center for Rural Studies, Mexico

Abstract

Social capital of small-scale farming systems matters to farmers livelihoods. Little empirical evidence exists, however, on the role of social capital for livestock farming systems. The objectives of this study were to identify diverse forms of social capital present in small-scale goat farming systems in Central Mexico, as well as to identify the factors that contributed to the creation or destruction of social capital.

Methods included consultancy of historical archives to identify the origins of goat farming in these regions and the socioeconomic conditions which favoured its consolidation. To characterise the production systems and to identify diverse forms of social capital involved in present goat keeping, we combined a cross-sectional and longitudinal quantitative survey among 40 stakeholders, with qualitative methods, mainly group discussions, open ended interviews, field trips guided by farmers and participant observation.

Small-scale goat farming systems had limited land assets, but could manage successfully a goat flock in the recent past through horizontal social capital, like connectedness with large crop farmers. Here, livestock assets and outputs played a role because often goat kids served as payments in kind or as gifts for letting goat flocks graze neighbours crop residues. Milk production as a main production output gives a farmers a reputation to deserve small credits from neighbours and from the milk middlemen or milk factory. A downside of horizontal social capital was related to unsolved land conflicts and even worsened in a backround of increasing drug violence. Similarly, a case of governmental corruption linked to a local development project for goat keepers, to some extent illustrates the destruction of vertical social capital among small-scale goat farmers.

We conclude that different forms of social capital have been essential for the consolidation and permanence of goat farming in the past. During the last decade, however, a strong erosion of social capital can be observed in these communities, a situation which compromises strongly the important contribution of goat farming to small farmers livelihoods.

Keywords: Goat farming, livelihoods, livestock production systems, Mexico, social capital