



Tropentag, September 14-16, 2010, Zurich

“World Food System —
A Contribution from Europe”

Contribution of Endemic Ruminants to Farmers' Livelihoods in The Gambia

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Abstract

Endemic ruminants in The Gambia, represented by the N'Dama cattle and Djallonké breeds of sheep and goats, are well adapted and productive in areas infected with trypanosomiasis. Despite these favourable attributes their contribution to farmers' livelihoods remains not well recognised. The present study characterises the specific functions they fulfil in smallholder crop-livestock production systems in the districts of Kiang West, Niamina East and Nianija in The Gambia.

We collected data in nine randomly selected villages of the three purposefully selected districts. Following a Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) approach, two-day group discussions were held in each selected village, comprising between 25 and 30 participants, among which cattle, sheep and goat owners, livestock product processors and vendors, herders and non-livestock owners. PRA tools used were resource mapping, wealth ranking, matrix ranking and scoring.

The wealth ranking revealed that livestock ownership was distributed in a highly skewed manner across wealth categories in all districts, especially for cattle with rich households owning 20 times as many cattle as poor households. Cattle were ranked first as the species contributing the most to farmers' livelihoods, because of the multitude of their services, such as draught power, manure, milk, meat and transportation. Goats and sheep were considered very important regarding their contribution to cash income; small ruminants were more important to women than men. Cattle were scored the highest for savings and insurance. Sheep and goats were also kept mainly as a means of saving and insurance; income and ceremonial purpose were the next reasons for keeping these species. The importance of saving and insurance depict the role of endemic ruminants as a buffer to crop failure in these mixed farming systems, where the most important contribution to the farmer's livelihood was crop farming, followed by livestock rearing and forest product harvesting. Given the predominance of endemic breeds, no comparison could be made with the livelihood contribution from exotic breeds.

Keywords: Endemic ruminants, livelihoods, participatory rural appraisal