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Providing Animal Health Services to the Poor in Northern Ghana: Rethinking the Role of Community Animal Health Workers?

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Abstract

Livestock keeping supports the livelihoods of about 70 % of the world's poor in developing countries. Yet, poor livestock keepers often lack access to affordable animal health services. In Ghana, the veterinary sector has experienced declining government support as a result of fiscal challenges. In view of this, the government promoted private practice and ceased the automatic employment of veterinarians (service providers with University Degree in animal health training) and of para-vets (service providers with Diploma in animal health training), which has reduced the number of trained service providers. However, private practice has flourished in the intensive production systems but not in marginal areas. As a result, the Community Animal Health Workers (CAHWs, community members with limited training) have been promoted in marginal areas to fill the gap in livestock health services. The paper uses the concepts of accessibility, affordability and transaction costs to examine the perceptions of livestock keepers about the various animal health service providers. The empirical analysis is based on a survey of 120 livestock keeping households in the Tolon-Kumbungu and Savelugu-Nanton districts in the Northern region of Ghana. A Multinomial Logit model was used to determine the factors that influence the households' choice of alternative animal health service providers. The results show that the government para-vets are the most preferred type of animal health service providers, while CAHWs are the least preferred. The reasons for this observation include high transaction costs of treatment even in case of CAHWs, and their low performance, which may result from limited training. In areas where government para-vets are few or not available, farmers have resorted to self-treatment or to selling sick animals for consumption, which has undesirable health implications. These practices also inflict significant financial losses to farmers. This paper finds that, therefore, the CAHWs system is not a sustainable solution to providing efficient animal health services to the rural poor in marginal areas. The paper proposes “market-smart” alternative solutions, which require a stronger engagement of the state to support poor livestock farmers in marginal areas, while at the same time harnessing synergies between the private and public sector.

Keywords: Animal health services, community animal health workers, government para-vets, livestock farmers, northern Ghana