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“Bridging the gap between increasing knowledge and decreasing resources”

Characterisation of Agro-Pastoralist Households Along the Bulgan River in the Altay Region of Western Mongolia

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Abstract

The livelihoods of 1.5 million Mongolian citizens - almost half of Mongolia's population - depend on animal husbandry. A sole dependency on livestock implies problems related to inter- and intra-annual variability in weather, water and forage availability. Recent socio-economic developments furthermore changed farming practices and product preferences and partly induced a loss of traditional and appropriate herding knowledge. The present survey characterised 225 agro-pastoral households along the Bulgan River Valley of western Mongolia in terms of their livelihood strategies and farm and livestock management. Interviews were conducted using semi-structured questionnaires; data were subjected to CATPCA and two-step cluster analysis. Results revealed a wide diversity of farm management approaches, a variable species composition of the households' livestock herds and a very strong focus on cashmere wool production. The annual livestock transhumance patterns partly reflect traditional herding practices, though it became evident that annual tracking distances are declining. Cropping activities played a secondary role, but were an additional and even alternative livelihood strategy. Four farm types could be distinguished, namely commercial livestock keeping (cL, 31%), commercial livestock keeping plus semi-commercial field cropping (cLscC, 11%), commercial field cropping (cC, 7%) and semi-commercial livestock keeping plus subsistence field cropping (scLsC, 51%). Cluster cL comprised households with a pure pastoralist lifestyle. For cLscC households, livestock was most important for generating cash income, while little additional income was supplied by field crops. cC farmers owned animals that were herded by other people; their focus was on cereal and vegetable production. Households of cluster scLsC dominated in the surveyed area with intermediate herd sizes and moderate importance of crop production activities. This first assessment of farming strategies provides the basis for a more detailed analysis of current opportunities and constraints of farmers' livelihood strategies in this very remote region with difficult infrastructure.

Keywords: Animal husbandry, farm classification, livelihood strategies