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## The Social Sustainability of Sheep Pastoralism in Western India: Impacts on Food Security

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### Abstract

In the semi-arid drylands of western India, mobile sheep pastoralism integrated with crop cultivation is practised by the Raika, a caste/community of traditional livestock keepers with a rich body of indigenous knowledge on all aspects of livestock keeping. The system provides multiple benefits with respect to food security, foreign currency earnings (most of the mutton is exported), organic manure and environmental services.

But an increasing number of young Raika abandon the traditional profession and migrate to the cities to find menial jobs. As a result the sheep population is in decline, with impacts on food security and the ecology of the region. In order to better understand their motivations, semi-structured extended interviews were undertaken with 52 Raika youths. 65 % of the interviewed persons responded that the financial returns from shepherding had decreased and that they expected to earn better incomes in the cities. Furthermore, migration was considered as exhausting, lonely and very hard work. Another major distraction is the increasing dissection of the landscape with difficulties accessing grazing areas. The bad image of herders as being dirty, poor and uneducated is another reason why young people aren't willing to stick to their traditional job. Unfortunately most of the young Raikas in the cities fail to reach their goal of earning more money than in their traditional herding profession (63 %).

For the sake of food security, both directly (production of meat and also milk) and indirectly (production of organic manure), it is imperative that societal recognition of sheep pastoralism is improved and the state governments support rather than ignore or disregard mobile shepherding as a food production strategy.

**Keywords:** Food production strategy, food security, indigenous knowledge, mobile shepherding, pastoralism, Raika, Rajasthan