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An Analysis of Smallholder Livestock Strategies in the Central Highlands of Kenya

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the livestock strategies of smallholder farmers in the Central Highlands Region of Kenya. Questionnaire surveys, interviews, and participatory rural appraisal methods were utilised by a multidisciplinary team of students from the University of Copenhagen and the University of Nairobi during fieldwork in Kibugu, Embu County, Kenya. The team found that smallholders in Kibugu depend upon the traditional coffee/tea-cow farming system. Furthermore, farmers prefer to raise exotic cattle breeds, despite their high resource demand and limited suitability to the Kenyan environment. Societal norms dictate a lower social status for farmers who raise small livestock such as poultry and dairy goats. On the other hand, dairy cows, particularly exotic, high producing breeds such as the Friesian, are valued as a reflection of high socioeconomic status. It was also found that government agricultural agencies are ill-equipped to provide effective training in livestock husbandry or entrepreneurship. Unlike other locations in the Central Highlands, Kibugu lacks NGOs promoting less demanding cattle breeds or smaller animals such as dairy goats. Additionally, most farmers lack the financial capital to expand production and take advantage of new market opportunities. Their livelihoods are also influenced by external factors such as land pressures and increasing input prices. Examined within a greater environmental context of increasing climate variability, seasonal unpredictability, and worsening drought, there are indeed many factors that constrain farmers from diversifying their livestock practices. In conclusion, this report recommends that smallholders establish husbandry, breeding, and marketing cooperatives in order to combine their resources and advocate for their interests in the market. Better funded and expanded extension services could encourage innovation and support farmers who aim to diversify production, take risks, and lower the cost burden of inputs. Ultimately, it was determined that holistic approaches to research and development could strengthen farmers' assets and help them adapt to a changing world.

Keywords: Dairy cattle, Kenya Central Highlands, livestock strategies, smallholder farming