



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

Introduction

Rajasthan is a semi-arid state in the west of India that produces 10% of the milk, 35% of the wool and 10% of the meat of the country. It ranks 1st in wool production, 1st in sale of live meat, and ranks 2nd in per capita availability of milk as well as in milk production. However the sheep population is decreasing gradually, from 14 million in 1997 to 11 million in 2007 and about 9 million in 2012 (Government of Rajasthan).

Livestock keeping has always been the economic backbone of Rajasthan's rural area. More than 80% of rural families keep livestock in their households. The contribution of the animal husbandry sector to the GDP of the State has been estimated to be around 9.16 %. About 35% of the income to small and marginal farmers comes from dairy and animal husbandry. In arid areas the contribution is as high as 50%.

The Raika are the most important pastoralist community of Rajasthan, herding camels, sheep and goats. They are a subgroup of the Rebari, the largest pastoral group of Western India that is estimated to number about 500,000-800,000 people. Besides providing live animals for food security and foreign currency earnings, they also generate organic manure and environmental services.

Traditionally the sons take over the herd of the father when they are old enough. But presently an increasing number of young Raika prefer moving to the big cities in order to find a different job.

Materials and Methods

A study was undertaken in the Godwar area of Rajasthan (Desuri and Bali tehsils of Pali district) to understand the perspectives and attitudes of the Raika community towards the future, especially their interest in continuing animal husbandry. Data were gathered through the review of published and grey literature, focus groups discussions with active herders, informal interviews with outside experts, and semi-structured extended interviews with 52 Raika youths. The interviews took about half an hour and the Raika were pleased to report their present problems and future perspectives.

Results

65% of the respondents said that herding no longer provides adequate livelihoods. As reasons for this, they mentioned disappearing pasture, bans on grazing in forest areas, diseases and lack of veterinary care, as well as falling wool prices. Some of the families go on long distance migration, but then face various en-route problems including non-availability of veterinary medicines, hostility from local persons, and theft of sheep by organised gangs.

69% of the interviewed Raika had to decrease their herd size over the last 5 years due to problems of finding grazing. They also forecasted that the situation would become worse. The majority of families stated that their sons do not want to take over the herds, and that their traditional way of life is disappearing. But after giving up their herd and working in the city 63% of the young Raika in the cities fail to reach their goal of earning more money than in their traditional herding profession. They actually suffer from their "new" life in the city as they earn little money, work very hard and have very bad living conditions.

Conclusion

Demand for meat and dairy products is growing in India and internationally, nevertheless the pastoralist producers of these goods do not see much of a future for their profession. For a win-win situation in which India's livestock production is sustained or increased, and young people are prevented from rural-urban migration and ending up in worse livelihood conditions, it is urgent to retain space for livestock in the landscape as well as providing better services as well as acknowledgment and appreciation of the important role pastoralists play in national and global food security.

Acknowledgement:

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