Research on smallholder livestock development deserves attention

Antonio Rota

The contribution of small dairy production units and small livestock (hereby defined as ‘smallholder livestock’) to the achievement of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is unquestionable. Worldwide there is evidence of a direct linkage between the improvement of smallholder livestock (the ‘asset’ of the poor) production and poverty reduction.

Despite this, national and international institutions are still reluctant to support smallholder livestock production systems, both financially and through adequate policy support.

Furthermore, development projects are still designed with a ‘blanket approach’ to address the needs of smallholder producers, not taking into considerations variables such as access to services and markets. Monitoring and evaluation components of livestock projects are not sufficiently developed, thus important socioeconomic data are nor collected and impact on the livelihood of resource-poor households is not appraised.

Over the last decade ‘adapted technologies’, good practices and knowledge have been generated and their effectiveness in improving productivity and reducing vulnerability of resource-poor households is now widely demonstrated.

Simple, affordable interventions based on good husbandry practices can have a substantial impact on productivity, primarily by reducing mortality and losses (e.g. vaccinations against Newcastle Disease or Peste des Petits Ruminants, respectively in poultry and small ruminants).

In addition, to develop smallholder livestock production, we need a comprehensive approach that address all components characterizing a value chain approach, in particular access to inputs (appropriate breeds, feeding systems, equipment), services (breeding, veterinary, extension and credit services) and markets (including transport).

To facilitate the development of smallholder livestock production, enabling frameworks with the following features are needed at the national level:

- Awareness raising of decision-makers in national governments and donor agencies about the effectiveness of smallholder livestock as a tool for poverty reduction;
• Developing effective and consistent national pro-poorn policies which are crucial to capitalise on the opportunities offered by the increasing demand for livestock products and poverty-focused agendas of several countries;

• Building the capacity of decision makers, project designers and technical staff to enable them develop effective policies, incentives and development programmes;

• Building the capacity of smallholder producers, especially women, youth, indigenous and tribal peoples to adapt and adopt innovative technologies;

• Supporting the creation of livestock farmers institutions which can help to voice their needs and facilitate the provision of services and inputs to the farming communities;

• Funding participatory adaptive research to identify appropriate technologies/models which are pro-poor, sustainable, economically viable and environmentally sound. This include sharing knowledge generated by farmers;

• Including smallholder livestock development in the curriculum of higher and technical education institutions to train a new generation of advisors/researchers;

• Developing adapted extension and training modules for capacity building, especially for women;

• Identifying market led approaches by producers supported by effective, accessible, qualitative services (breeding, veterinary services, credit, processing, marketing, extension, training, etc.) and infrastructure;

• Implementing effective smallholder livestock development programme with the embedded potential to generate further knowledge and data, to capitalize on relevant learning generated and to facilitate up scaling of appropriate innovations in other projects;

• Supporting knowledge sharing platforms and networks (such as the Community of Practice for Pro-poor Livestock Development: www.cop-ppld.net) through which innovative “field tested” technologies, good practices and lessons are made available and where new knowledge, and mutual learning through peer-to-peer exchange is promoted.

The partnership between our institutions, IFAD and ILRI has good examples of common efforts aiming at addressing some aspects of the above framework.

I am fully convinced that the arrival of Carlos Sere in IFAD will coincide in the development of even broader partnerships and strategic efforts to support the development of smallholder livestock production systems.

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On 9 and 10 November 2011, the ILRI Board of Trustees hosted a 2-day ‘liveSTOCK Exchange’ to discuss and reflect on livestock research for development.