Accentuating livestock production to augmenting rural livelihoods

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One of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is set to reduce poverty by half in the year 2015. However, poverty has remained drastically rampant in many parts of the world in contrast to diversified efforts to do so. Particularly, poverty is ascendant in rural areas where the majority of the poor are dwelling. As various sources indicate, approximately 75 per cent of the world’s poor live in rural areas. Livestock are important sources of livelihood for most of these people. Animals have numerous functions to the lives of the rural community in one or another way. They produce important food products and fertilizer. They are a source of income and employment. They are also fulfilling banking and insurance functions.

Needles to say, agriculture is the main means of living for 85 per cent of the country’s population. It is also the backbone of the country’s economy. Agriculture accounts for 46 per cent of the GDP while livestock contributes 30 per cent to the agricultural GDP and 19 per cent to the export earnings. According to the FAO (1998) estimate, Ethiopia possesses 31 million heads of cattle, 23.4 million heads of sheep, 17.5 million heads of goats and 1 million heads of camels and seven million mules. However, the contribution of this huge resource to the national income and export earning is disproportionately small. The low productivity of the sector is attributed to poor husbandry and management systems, prevalence of disease and malnutrition as well as poor genetic potential.

The other recurrent reason for the deterioration of the livestock products is climate change. It worsens the problem for water and pasture land for livestock is declining from time to time. That is why the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) has made livestock ‘good and bad’ main agenda of its annual meeting. Recently, ILRI has conducted its annual meeting here in Addis Ababa. Including the Institute’s staff, partners and members of the board of trustees of ILRI participated on the meeting.

Alan J. Duncan, Livestock Scientist and Chair of the Organizing Committee, said ‘Livestock: The good, the bad and the ugly’ was the major focus of the ILRI Annual Programme Meeting for this year. The Institute has long promoted the virtuous role of livestock production for the poor. Its calendars and posters proclaim the value of ‘livestock for culture’, ‘livestock for women’, ‘livestock for food’, and so on.

Moreover, in the wider world it seems that this voice of the Institute is drowned out by a very different view of livestock: A view that sees farm animals as polluting the planet and degrading landscapes. Therefore, the annual meeting is considered as an opportunity for its community to consider these and other perspectives and perhaps to try on some new approaches to livestock research for development.

Duncan, told The Ethiopian Herald that the annual meeting was all about the positive and negative aspects of livestock production globally. Such topic is selected to stress on how farm animals offer poor communities in poor countries many benefits, or ‘goods’, such as better household nutrition, greater food security, and more sustainable crop farming through inputs such as livestock manure to fertilize soils. And similarly, the theme of the meeting is also enabled the participants to discuss on how a dairy cows are sometimes ought to be causing the so-called livestock ‘bad’ conditions. Therefore, the livestock ‘bad’ are related with conditions like overgrazing and loss of biodiversity, environmental degradation, water pollution, diseases transmitted between animals and people, greenhouse gas emissions that contribute negatively to the environment.

Then, livestock have positive contribution for the enhancement of the socioeconomic condition of the poor people on one hand and a negative environmental effects as well. Hence, taking the balance between the livestock goods and bads would make the sector more effective. Thus, in connection with its annual meeting, the Institute has held a livestock marketplace inside its compound on which all ILRI partner organizations have participated.

According to Duncan, the recently held livestock marketplace has created and opportunity to all ILRI families to interact with each other and learn from the activities that each partner organization is doing. It is also created an opportunity to interact with some invited people from outside of the ILRI families. Some of the ILRI partners which include NGOs, research, commercial and private partners have displayed what they are undertaking to contribute for the enhancement of the productivity of the sector.

There are a huge number of livestock resources in sub-Saharan Africa out of which Ethiopia alone is possessing about 40 million livestock. However, the production gained from this sector is relatively very low. For instance, in Ethiopia the average milk production is one and/or one and half liters per day per animal. Then, one of the ways to mitigate a greenhouse gas emissions is through intensification of dairy production. That is, if the amount of milk gained per animals is increased, that would enable to reduce the number of animals and greenhouse gas emissions as well. Therefore, intensification of livestock production is believed as one way to lead to less greenhouse gas emissions on a national base.

Duncan further explained that most people make their living by animal husbandry in Ethiopia and some other countries are keeping their livestock for many reasons. They keep animals for a source of security during terrible time, for land preparation and for some other...
In general, in Ethiopia livestock are kept for multipurpose. However, poor animal keepers are not obtaining deserving benefit from their livestock owing to the low productivity of the sector and lack of access to market.

Livestock market is not well developed in the country particularly in pastoral areas. The smallholder farmers could not get livestock market access both at regional and international. At the same time, these markets have been subject to a global transformation in recent years. The demand for animal food products is rising sharply in many developing countries, resulting in a pronounced reorientation of agricultural production in general. So, pastoral communities are yet to be bucked up to focus on the productivity of the sector.

Then, the connections between markets and farmers need to be improved and thereby enable the community to gain improved benefits from their hardwork. Normally, if there is a ready market for livestock and their products, it would provide worthy incentives for farmers to intensify their production and to generate more income from the sector rather than keeping them for subsistence purposes.

But, although livestock immediately aid the livelihoods of the world's most vulnerable and marginalized citizens, some of the livestock keepers have limited knowledge on how to feed their animals effectively. They have limited access to the knowledge about feeding and providing healthcare for their animals. So, ILRI is looking at how knowledge flows in rural environments, for example, how different stakeholders within the rural environment work together to allow new development innovation systems in the area.

So, the extension services, research services, the private sector and the farmers themselves are having their respective important role to play while acting together in the rural community so as to allow new development spirits in the area. Livestock development, however, has had a very mixed record with regard to poverty alleviation. Then, livestock is one major area in ILRI. Of course, every stakeholders need to play their respective role to enhance the productivity of the sector and reduce its 'bads' as well.

Here, ILRI which is an international research institute has a global mandate to look at the livestock condition. Based on that, the Institute is actively working with the national research systems here in Ethiopia to look at the specific problems. In general, it has strong partnerships with other development stakeholders to contribute its share in the enhancement of the productivity of the sector. Similarly, the government need to put in place or create an enabling environment for enhancing the livestock production. Most of the rhetoric of 'poverty focused' projects and programmes of some countries is poorly understood livestock being a tool for poverty alleviation. Likewise, agricultural development related policy of Ethiopia is also tended to fever anable crops like wheat, maize, teff and the like. Livestock sector that has a potential to get out the poor people from poverty was neglected. But, when it is seen globally, demand for livestock products is increasing very rapidly. And this condition would create new opportunities to use livestock as income generating source. This is also perhaps requires some policy changes to give attention livestock as a means of income generating opportunity in Ethiopia.

Just to strengthening its activities, ILRI is part of the Global Consortium called the consultative group on the international research. But, there are many change going on within this consortium. For instance, recently ILRI has signed a new agreement that would enable it to establish a new consortium which can change the phase of global agricultural research. So, as it is entering into the new phase, ILRI is working more closely with other institutions within this consortium. The consortium is also aimed at bringing different centers together to work on more collective and connective ways on some agricultural challenges globally.

The Government also believes that the success of agricultural development depends, among other things; on the existence of an efficient marketing system. Cognizant of this, Ethiopia has placed considerable emphasis on market and marketing issues so as to enhance rapid, sustainable and broad-based economic growth of all development sectors and thereby reduce poverty. As part of furthering the enforcement of market liberalization, market centred agricultural development aims at linking smallholders to both local and international markets through continually improving their productivity and competitiveness.

By doing this, it is aimed at enabling smallholders and those poor livestock keeping community secure reasonable share of benefit from local and global agricultural marketing system. Then, the government would encourage animal husbandry to benefit from the sector and contribute its share for the development of the country economy.