Art & Science... 

ILRI officials hope that the work of this facility will support Ethiopia’s ongoing fight to prevent childhood stunting, which has already been reduced by a third since 2010. Research shows that Ethiopia, Africa’s second most populous state with one of the region’s largest livestock sectors, demand for milk, meat and eggs—of domestic consumption and export—is rising rapidly. If all livestock production can be scaled up to meet household nutritional needs for more affordable and sustainably than other types of farm animals,” said ILRI Director General Jimmy Smith.

“We want our poultry work in Ethiopia to serve as a model for how livestock can be a source of economic growth and prosperity and a way to improve household incomes and nutrition that can be particularly beneficial for women farmers, who typically invest their earnings from poultry in feeding their families and educating their children.”

Art & Science Wed in Quest for the Perfect Chicken

By Our Staff Writer

ADDIS ABEBA - Researchers in Ethiopia are embarking on a quest to create the perfect chicken for African farmers with an unlikely ally— a Belgian conceptual artist who has spent 20 years cross-breeding indigenous chickens, from China and Egypt to Senegal and Cuba.

Incubated Worlds, a research and breeding center in Addis Abeba, will also house a permanent art installation showcasing the work of Koen Vanmechelen, including photographs, videos and books of chickens’ genetic codes.

“This is going to be the most intriguing poultry facility in the world,” said Vanmechelen, whose Cosmopolitan Chickens Project set out to create a chicken carrying the genes of all the planet’s breeds.

“I see it as a place where people can immediately understand that this very global livestock animal—found in almost every country in the world and acceptable as food in every religion—is the product of many local communities,” he said.

“And if we don’t maintain and value this cosmopolitan heritage, then we could lose it.”

At the center, scientists from the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) and local partners including Haramaya University will compare different types of Ethiopian chickens and cross-breed them naturally with others, including Vanmechelen’s.

-Breeding ‘the Chicken’-

These chickens will be crossed with indigenous breeds of chickens preferred by farmers in Ethiopia to create what Vanmechelen and his scientist partners are calling the Ethiopian African Planetary Community Chicken. Tadelle Dessie, ILRI’s livestock geneticist, said cross-breeding Vanmechelen’s highly diverse birds with local varieties could strengthen poultry resilience and local food systems.

This approach seeks to broaden, replenish and conserve the genetic base of Ethiopian chickens, said the scientists.

“What we ultimately want through Incubated Worlds is chickens that have the genetic diversity they need both to survive devastating poultry diseases and to adapt to a changing climate all while still producing a lot of food for farmers,” Tadelle added.

Another ILRI’s livestock geneticist Olivier Hanotte, on the other hand, is positive and said, “Every generation of his chickens seems to be healthier than the last, but they haven’t been selected for productivity.”

“Our challenge is now to incorporate this diversity in a chicken for Ethiopians that is also very productive,” Hanotte added.

“What we want is a new animal that produces eggs, which would grow relatively fast and can reach a weight of two to three kilos in a minimum amount of time,” he said.

-Improving nutrition-

While ILRI hopes Incubated Worlds makes the subject of livestock diversity engaging and stimulating, the Ethiopian facility is also a response to food insecurity in Africa.

A quarter of the world’s 815 million undernourished people are in Sub-Saharan Africa, and climate conditions are worsening hunger, says the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization.

Feeding children an egg a day could prevent stunting, a condition resulting from poor nutrition which hinders cognitive growth, learning and economic potential, research shows.