Women livestock keepers of South India prefer local to global breeds

Ilse Köhler-Rollefson and
Karthikeya Sivasenapathy

For most women in South India, rearing local breeds is hassle free, add-on and a part-time activity that can be combined with other income generating activities. Authors through a number of cases, highlight merits that these women see in local breeds like – low investment in terms of housing and feed, prolificacy and hardyness.

About 400 million, or two thirds, of the estimated 600 million poor livestock keepers in the world are women (Thornton et al, 2002). It is therefore not surprising that there are numerous studies about women and livestock, and that many institutions, such as IFAD and Heifer have a gender-approach to livestock development. Curiously, the vast majority of reports about women, livestock and poverty alleviation do not specify the breeds of goats, sheep, cattle and other livestock species that are involved. Certainly, in many cases, so called "improved" (*i.e.* exotic or crossbred) with their supposed higher output are promoted.

However, in India's southern states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, there are many success stories of women livestock keepers raising local breeds.

Making Do with Mecheri Sheep

For widowed Palaniammal (60) in Veerasolapuram village in Tiruppur district, Tamil Nadu , her flock of 13 Mecheri sheep is her sole source of income. The Mecheri is a hair sheep famous for its very high quality skins. It is perfectly adapted to the local pasture system of Korangadu, which is privately owned sylvipasture system enclosed by a live fence. The most important

Mecheri sheep are adaptable to the local pasture systems.

Malabari goats, a means of building assets.

Kangayam stud bulls are being used for breeding.

vegetation are *Acacia leucophloea, Cenchrus setigerus* and *Cenchrus ciliaris* and wild legumes and grasses. The Mecheri ewe gives birth to about 1.5 lambs per year or one lamb in 8 months. [Mecheri ewes average has three lambings in two years and single lambs are the norm]

Palaniammal embarked on her sheep production venture, some ten years ago, thanks to a government scheme that enabled her to obtain 10 ewes and a ram for Rs. 15,000 on 50% loan and 50% subsidy basis. To feed her flock, she is leasing 7 acres of Korangadu pasture from a Gounder landlady for Rs. 5,000 per year. This nets her an annual profit of about Rs. 5000 from the sale of lambs. Marketing of manure fetches an additional Rs. 1200. With these returns she was able to repay her loan within 7 years.

Palaniammal's work is hard – she has to walk about 3 km every day bringing water from the pump to the pastureland. And due to the current drought, she has to purchase additional feed – bajra stover– to maintain the sheep. But veterinary inputs are free, enabling her to deworm regularly. Palaniammal is neither complaining about her lot, nor worried about her future. She is proud that she can buy gifts for her two married daughters and grandchildren when they come to visit, and in fact she was able to support one of her daughters with cash by selling a good number of sheep- in between her flock had risen to 40 head- but she sold a large number to provide cash to support one of her daughters. When Palaniammal will be too old to take care of the sheep, she will sell them, give the money to a reliable person and live off the interest.

Keeping Kangayam stud bulls

The Kangayam cattle is a famous draft breed of western Tamil Nadu and forms an integral element of the Korangadu pasture. Earlier this sturdy breed was essential for lifting water, ploughing, hauling the harvest and rural transportation in general. A number of factors, including irrigation, availability of electrical and diesel pumps, as well as a rise in property prices, have resulted in a dramatic reduction of the population.

Nevertheless Sundaram Ramaswami and his wife Soundra of Mulanur village have specialized in keeping Kangayam stud bulls for breeding. Their four bulls serve an average of six cows per day for a fee of Rs. 150 per service. Interestingly, the majority of the cows they service are Holstein-Friesian grades that have difficulties in conceiving via artificial insemination. Soundra not only had the idea of keeping stud bulls, but is also the one handling the bulls, supplying them with water and keeping records of the services. According to her husband, she is the only one to whom the old bull in the picture listens to. The couple and the bull have a sentimental relationship: he starts shedding tears when he is shouted at and although he is at an age when other bulls are retired, his owners want him to die a natural death and plan to give him a proper burial.

Binu and her goats

The Malabari goat is the first breed to be recognized in Kerala and takes its name from the hot and humid Malabari coast that is famous for the cultivation of spices. It is a vigorous and prolific breed that produces both milk and meat. Scientific studies have shown it to be superior to imported Boer animals and Boer crosses; yet the latter continues to be promoted by the Government. Binu, a poor mother from Athirampuzha in Kottayam is benefiting from this breed. She keeps just one Malabari doe, but this animal has produced strong and healthy quadruplets three months ago which will be ready for sale in about one month. Because of the booming demand for meat, a four month old female fetches Rs. 1500, while males are sold for Rs. 2500. Mother and offspring are sustained almost exclusively on free forage that Binu collects from roadsides and plantations. Even the goat shed is constructed completely from throw-aways and without any financial investment. Binu will use the income to build assets for her children by buying gold for them, and undertaking some repairs on her house.

For Binu who covers her daily expenditures by going for casual labour, the Malabari goat is a means of building assets and a pleasant, no-risk means of generating income.

Shirley and Ankamali pigs

Although the Kerala government is promoting exotic white pigs, it is the local black Ankamali pig breed that is better suited for income generation for resource poor farmers. Its advantages are its small size (only 20 kg slaughter weight), ability to thrive on local feed, disease resistance, heat tolerance and uncomplicated reproduction.

Shirley is a single mother raising two daughters in Onamthuruthu in Kottayam District of Kerala. She keeps two sows and one boar of the Ankamali pig breed, sustaining them on kitchen waste, leaf fodder, and weeds. Recently, she sold 27 piglets at the age of 45 days, each for Rs. 1000. She also keeps a few goats and is hoping to add a Vechur cow.

Vechur cattle

The Vechur cattle is only about 90cm high and originated in the coco-nut groves of coastal South Kerala. Due to the heavy-handed promotion of cross-breeding, it would have become extinct, but for the efforts of Prof. Sosamma Iype and a few of her students(later transformed as the Vechur Conservation Trust) who scouted out and collected the handful of remaining pure animals and now have brought the population back to about 1500 head. The small cow is now proving extremely attractive for people who are keen on zero-budget or low-input farming, since it can be kept in a small area and sustained on crop waste and weeds. It is also popular as a companion animal and to provide milk for households with small children. There is now a long waiting-list for this animal at the Vechur farm in Moozhikulangara, near Vechur village in Kottayam District.

Conclusions

Local breeds seem to have many advantages over the improved varieties that are generally promoted. Among these are the disease resistance and prolificacy and their error friendliness. These animals require low investment, if any, in terms of housing and purchase of fodder and feed. In fact most inputs are available free. For this reason, raising local breeds for most women is a rather hassle-free add-on and part-time activity that can be combined with other income generating activities, and reliably leads to good economic returns.

By comparison, improved varieties of livestock may have higher outputs (at least in theory), but require housing to protect them from the climate, regular disease prophylaxis, as well as purchased concentrate feed. Often, there are problems with fertility in the long run, and the yields may not be as high as expected. For instance, in Kerala, after half a century of cross-breeding, the average daily milk yield of cross-breeds stands only at about 6.5 kg. The number of these animals is going down and some local dairy farmers have even stopped breeding, preferring to purchase pregnant animals that they sell for slaughter after their lactation period is completed. Generally, nobody stays in dairying for more than 10 years, according to Dr. Sosamma Iype, a retired professor of animal genetics and head of the Vechur Conservation Trust.

Vechur cattle ideal for low input farming.

Despite the obvious benefits of the local breeds and the drawbacks of the cross-breeds, credit institutions, such as NABARD and others, give loans only for the latter, and cross-breds are relentlessly promoted by the animal husbandry departments. It is time for a paradigm change!

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Ilse Köhler-Rollefson
Projects Coordinator,
League of Pastoral Peoples and Endogenous Livestock Development, Pragelatostr 20; 64372 Ober-Ramstadt, Germany
E-mail: ilse.koehleroll@gmail.com

Karthikeya Sivasenapathy
Managing Trustee,
Senapathy Kangayam Cattle Research Foundation, Kuttapalayam, Tamil Nadu

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