

Smallstock in Development, a toolbox

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Introduction. Livestock in general, and smallstock in particular (especially sheep, goats and poultry), have an important role to play in enhancing the livelihoods of the poor. Smallstock are particularly important as a means of support for poorer households and tend to be the first livestock that a household aspires to. A number of studies refer to the significant advantages of smallstock (e.g. in Delgado et al. 1999, IFAD 2004 and others). They are less costly to acquire and maintain, they are more convenient for consumption within the household while accidental death of a single animal is less damaging, they grow and breed faster and can often thrive on harsher terrain. A typical progression would start with poultry, and then a few goats or sheep are kept for milk and/or for fattening and slaughter. The cash from sales of smallstock products is used to buy household needs including food, and to improve food security at household level. In the longer term, poor households may aspire to owning larger livestock, for example a milking cow. However, for many this may not be an appropriate or even a viable option and smallstock remains a mainstay of the household economy. Viewed from a different perspective, human population growth, increasing urbanization and rising incomes are increasing the demand for livestock and livestock products in the developing countries. Livestock production is growing faster than any other agricultural sub-sector – the livestock revolution (Delgado et al., 1999). It is smallstock that are most suited to meet these demands – their roles in poverty reduction, and in meeting the demands for increased production. However, smallstock are both complex and varied and there is a considerable body of existing information or knowledge relevant to their husbandry and production, with further knowledge being added by recent and ongoing research. Similarly, smallstock keepers themselves represent a wide spectrum of rural, and urban, communities in a range of environments and these require a variety of different approaches in the provision of information. A key question is how the effective delivery of this information can be accomplished.

Information Sources and the Information Gap. The provision and delivery of development related information, including livestock related material, is traditionally in the form of books, bulletins, research reports, papers, policy briefings, papers, fact sheets and posters. Further information is published in academic journals. Whilst there is a large and growing body of published information on various aspects related to smallstock development, how much of this is in practice available to those that require it most – those working with or otherwise providing advice to poor livestock farmers, or to poor farmers without livestock but who aspire to them? Available published information, in either hard copy or electronic format, is most easily available in the developed world and generally much more difficult to come by elsewhere. This gap between the information rich and the information poor, both within countries (the elite and the disadvantaged within countries) and between countries (rich and poor countries) is growing.

In general, the most difficult information to access is that published in academic journals (and for reasons of copyright it was not possible to include journal papers in the Smallstock in Development Toolbox). In strong contrast, information freely available in electronic format via the web is potentially the easiest to access. Despite the evident problems with access to electronic information in poorer regions, people and institutions everywhere want electronic access to this information and are working towards these goals (Kagan 1999). Many within developing countries view the internet as an opportunity to gain access to knowledge and services from around the world in a way that would have been previously unimaginable. Internet kiosks for example, mostly facilitating email, are increasingly common in many parts of Africa and Asia. However, despite this, reliable access to the information content of the web remains poor, largely due to unreliable telecommunications – a situation that in some areas is changing. On the other hand, the increasing numbers of computers and computer users provides a significant potential for distribution of information via CD-ROM.

Effective Information Delivery – Toolboxes on CD-ROM. Most development related information can be included in one format or another on CD-ROM. A single CD can hold a large amount of material and is cheap to reproduce and distribute in large numbers. Moreover, the potential access to and creation of CD-ROM based information is increasing in the key target groups, typically NGOs and extension agents working with livestock keepers. A number of simple guidelines assists in the creation of individual documents or information on specific topics. Jargon should be avoided and simplicity rather than complexity should be sought. The seven-Cs of effective communication should also be considered – creative, credible, convincing, complete, current, clear, and concise. However, the key to providing effective delivery of information includes not only the document containing the information itself, but ways of “finding” these documents, especially given that the user may not have a clear idea of what they are looking for, perhaps simply that there is a problem requiring a solution. It is also important to recognise that different users, with varying experience and diverse backgrounds will tend to use an information resource in different ways and focus on different components of the details provided.

The html format developed for use on the internet provides a robust and flexible mechanism for delivery of much of the available information, and this can be tailored for use with CD-ROM. Importantly, no additional software is required beyond the internet browser installed by default on most personal computers. Combined with the use of Adobe Acrobat PDF files and the free Acrobat reader, the html format enables an information resource to be constructed for and tailored to any given set of topics – a “Toolbox”. The information itself can be entirely text-based, or can include diagrams and illustrations as appropriate. Menus, hyperlinks, in-text buttons or icons, and suitable graphics can all be employed to assist the user in navigating from their chosen starting point to explore the available information. Colour

can be used for emphasis or to draw attention to specific topics. Diagrams or concept maps (see Figure 1) additionally provide a means of illustrating the breadth and scope of information presented for a given set of topics, as well as an additional means of navigation within the toolbox. These also provide an important mechanism for drawing attention to related issues which in a normal paper and text based system may otherwise be very easily ignored. As part of a discussion of animal feeds the user may, for example, be made aware of any social, environmental, health, welfare, economic and marketing issues. This also demands that those charged with creating the toolbox content also take care to consider these related issues. The information content and navigation within the toolbox is then further supported by a search mechanism, similar to that commonly used on web sites.

A Smallstock Toolbox. The Smallstock in Development toolbox provides a range of practical information and descriptions of techniques, "tools", and fact-sheets to assist in increasing the efficiency of operations of smallholders and the productivity of their animals. In order that users may make best use of this information, these are supported by a significant body of background material, technical information, further reading materials, and discussion of major topics related to smallstock development.

The toolbox forms a resource for use by NGOs, extension workers and others involved in livestock development. The primary purpose is to provide institutions or individuals that inform or interact with resource-poor livestock keepers with information on smallstock in an accessible manner to assist in tackling some of the problems they face.

The tools include technical interventions, husbandry advice, policy guidelines and empowerment suggestions. The overall scope is to improve the management of knowledge generated by research and generally improve the communication between farmers and the research institutions. The toolbox does not attempt to provide all the answers to what is clearly a large and complex topic, but is based on the experience of research carried out by DFID's Livestock Production Programme and other bodies. The toolbox currently includes more than 5,800 files contained in over 400 folders/sub-folders. This includes 1,725 linked html files and about 700 Acrobat PDF files, in all totalling over 550 Mbytes of file space. Many of these documents, reports, fact-sheets or html pages can be printed and used as they are or read on-screen. Alternatively, the content of many html pages can be used and adapted by users (using Word or other text editors) together with additional locally available material and knowledge to prepare locally-specific versions of individual topics.

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Figure 1. Concept map illustrating the first level of topics included in the Smallstock in Development Toolbox, and primary relationships between them.

