

Fair to share farmers' findings

In Zaire there was recently an agricultural fair where the main purpose was not to exchange farm products but rather to exchange knowledge. Farmer researchers met to show and tell each other how they have found ways to improve goat-keeping.

Mulume Mapatano

In eastern Zaire, farmers who want to work together to solve a local problem in cropping or animal-keeping have formed small groups called "farmer research brigades", with the support of the non-governmental organisation ADI-Kivu (Action for Rural Development in Kivu). The aim of each brigade is to gain a better understanding of a problem they regard as important, to collect local and outside information related to the problem and to develop solutions within their means. They try to put local resources, including knowledge, to best use and to use a minimum of external resources which cost much time and money to obtain.

For example, the Katanga Young Farmers brigade collected information about how different farmers store beans in their own and other areas, as well as storage techniques suggested by development agents they were able to contact. They compared these techniques to find out which ones work best in their own area.

The brigades negotiate with ADI-Kivu to obtain the support they need to do their research. This may consist of equipment such as a magnifying glass, agricultural inputs to test, means of recording results or credit for getting started.

Goat information exchange

These farmer brigades doing their own action-research can become small nodes of agricultural innovation and communication. After they have studied a problem and have found out things that could be useful for others, the brigades are expected to publish their results. It is on this condition that they receive support from ADI-Kivu. But how best to make results public? Ways are needed to speed up farmer-to-farmer communication.

In December 1993, three years after farmer brigades started their research into goat-keeping, ADI-Kivu organised an "agricultural fair" at Ikoma, near the Zaire-Rwanda border. Here, several brigades from different villages could come together to show each other what they already know and have newly found out.

The week-long fair was focused on local knowledge and innovations in goat-keeping and crop-livestock interactions. The members of the research brigades and other farmers from nearby villages observed and discussed different aspects of goat breeding, management and feed-

ing. This was done in small groups, so that everyone had a chance to contribute. Then individuals from the groups told the other groups the main points and answered their questions. Some groups made simple physical models using local materials to illustrate what they had found out.

Feeds and animal medicines

Particularly detailed information was given by farmers about the different types of feed - natural forage, browse, farm byproducts etc - eaten by goats at different times of the year, and about special leaves given to special animals such as pregnant and milking does. Information was exchanged about various local methods of detecting when does are ready for breeding and how conception can be stimulated.

One farmer brigade has specialised in veterinary problems. COLUMAPHAR (COmité de LUTte contre les MALadies par la PHARmacopée, Committee for Fighting Disease with Medicines) consists of nine people who have compiled information about the most common animal diseases in the area. They collected herbs, some of which grow far away, and have dried, milled and conserved them in packets. They displayed samples of herbs they grew in their own herbal garden in Katana.



Keeping goats in stables introduced new activities: a farmer collects fodder from contour bunds.

Some of these were not known to other farmers at the fair, while some farmers were able to give information that was new to COLUMAPHAR.

To exchange ideas about crop-livestock interactions, the participants were divided into four groups which visited four different members of the KOLERALUBAGA brigade. They observed where and how the animals are housed, how the manure is used and how the animals are fed. The farmers gave advice to each other, based on their own experience, such as about where and how to collect wastes from the kitchen and goathouse so that these can be better used in cropping.

Prize-winning goats

During the week, the farmers identified the criteria important for good goat breeding. The final day of the fair was devoted to an exhibition of the farmers' prize goats. A committee of judges including both farmers and development agents selected the best four bucks and the best four does. This was done to find animals which could be used for breeding to improve the performance of the local breed. ADI-Kivu gave prizes to the owners of the winning animals: farming handtools and money. The fair ended in an atmosphere of celebration.

Many sources of ideas

The fair brought together many sources of information and advice to improve goat husbandry and crop-livestock linkages. Besides crop farmers and animal-keepers, also researchers and technicians from government and NGOs in the Kivu area attended. But ADI-Kivu made it clear to the latter that they were expected not to teach but rather to learn from the farmers and to contribute complementary information only after the farmers had shared their own ideas. For example, technicians added to the wealth of local knowledge about feed resources by giving examples of concentrated feedstuffs which can be mixed from local materials.

The agricultural fair at Ikoma provided a forum for farmer-researchers and people from formal institutes of research and development to exchange experiences and innovations and, thus, to enrich each other's knowledge. Above all, it was a lively and enjoyable event that gave farmer brigades an opportunity to publish their research results in a locally appropriate way.

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More information about the farmer brigades and the agricultural fair can be found in the reports "Le savoir paysan: un réservoir bien plein" and "La foire agricole d'Ikoma" available from ADI-Kivu.