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How better markets for village chickens can boost livelihoods

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Village chickens are a pathway to alleviating poverty in resource-poor communities. Improvements to the informal poultry value chain, such as access to the market, commercialization, training and land, would assist in improving food security.

Introduction

There have been growing global challenges around poverty, hunger, malnutrition, and food security in developing countries, especially in rural areas. The Food and Agricultural Organisation has expressed concern about food availability crises, and it is expected that the impact on vulnerable groups will be worsen. We suggest that increasing the availability of animal protein through local production is important to boost food availability. For example, chickens are the key entry point for addressing malnutrition, food security, and poverty in resource-poor communities.ⁱ They have the potential to provide high-quality and safe agricultural products such as eggs and meat for consumption. In developing countries, approximately 475 million farmers keep village chickens, and the production depends on less than two hectares of land. Farmers in resource-poor communities already rely heavily on chickens for survival. Chickens' ability to produce meat and eggs with minimal or no management inputs presents an opportunity to improve the informal market to feed a growing population and even to participate in the international market to gain foreign exchange.

Village chickens are mostly reared by rural women who face a number of socio-economic challenges. The chickens roam around scavenging for feed resources and can adapt to harsh conditions, thus keeping inputs to a minimum. Their ability to adapt to harsh conditions is potentially also an advantage as rural areas are affected by climate change and possible food shortages. The landless and those without cattle, sheep, or goats place a high socioeconomic value on chickens, which are a shared resource among the various gender groups in rural areas. Village hens should therefore be given priority in food security programs.ⁱⁱ The food and agricultural industries are greatly impacted by unforeseen difficulties like pandemics and natural disasters. One example is COVID-19, a pandemic disease that spread across the globe in 2020 and made food insecurity worse, particularly for vulnerable groups.

Recommendations of village chickens for policy influence

The FAO indicated that various food-production systems and agricultural practices were required for the 2023 implementation plan to satisfy human needs for the present and the future. The Sustainable Development Goal Policy 2030 plan, mainly number 2 (Zero Hunger), requires an urgent and concerted plan for food security and sustainable agriculture, especially in developing countries.ⁱⁱⁱ Developing strategies to achieve Sustainable Development Goals that address food security and rural developments, including underutilized products and their gaps for sustainable agriculture, is critical.^{iv} Village chickens not only play a crucial role economically, socially, and nutritionally; they can also empower women to support their livelihoods in the household.

Numerous experts and policy officials globally recognize the profitability of village chicken production and its potential to address poverty and malnutrition.^v They are also more environmentally sustainable than extensive commercial operations because they utilize local resources, require less infrastructure, have a lower carbon footprint, and are more resilient to extreme weather events.^{vi} The informal market in village chickens can achieve several of the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, such as 1-No Poverty, 2-Zero Hunger, 3-Good Health and Well-Being, 4-Gender Equality, and 10-Reduce Inequality.^{vii} Specifically, this informal market can contribute significantly to meeting goals 1 (No Poverty) and 2 (Zero Hunger) particularly for vulnerable groups, if the correct measures are taken.^{viii}

The informal value chain of village chickens

The informal village chicken-value chain begins with household producers (farmers) who sell village poultry products to retailers (vendors) who are considered consumers, who then trade them in various places such as Central Business Districts. This niche is informal or traditional, with no regulations or support for various stakeholders. It is important to improve the informal value chain of village chickens by addressing both the challenges and opportunities in the market, with a view to determine what interventions are necessary. Village chickens do not qualify to participate in the mainstream, where they can compete with commercial chickens such as broilers and layers. This is due to their poor performance and low inputs, which result in low outputs.

Improving the informal value chain in economically disadvantaged communities is essential for leveraging village chickens as an underutilized resource to mitigate food insecurity. This will allow policymakers to formulate policies centred on the use of village chickens as a protein source, especially for vulnerable groups. Importantly, government needs to improve the availability and accessibility of land and funding, thereby creating job opportunities.

Village chicken producers and vendors in the informal value chain

Table 1 below provides detailed information about village chicken producers who are regarded as suppliers for vendors. Over 52% of the farmers are females, aged from 20 to 70, with farming experience ranging from less than five to more than 30 years. They farm these chickens for consumption, trade, and cultural purposes. Their main sources of income range from vending to government grants and pensions. Compared with commercial chickens, farmers prefer village chickens over broiler chickens. The reasons are mainly health benefits, long shelf life, taste, low labour, quality meat, availability, and high meat yield. Farmers depend on indigenous knowledge to farm the chickens; there is no available chicken production training. But 90% of them are interested in training with the intention of maximizing production for profit.

Table 1: The demographics of village chicken producers participating in the informal value chain

Demographic characteristics	Ntembeni %	Sweetwaters %	KwaShange %	P-value
<i>Gender of the owner of the chickens</i>				
Female	64	54	52	*
Male	36	46	48	
<i>The age range of farmers</i>				
20 to 30	28	14	3	*
30 to 40	34	24	20	
40 to 50	14	32	12	
50 to 60	14	14	16	
60 to 70	10	16	44	
<i>Farming experience (years)</i>				
<5	38	26	26	*
>5	28	18	22	
>10	8	18	34	
>20	10	12	12	
>30	16	26	6	
<i>Major source of income</i>				
Vending	6	6	8	NS
Pension	12	22	38	
Formal work	12	12	12	
Livestock	10	12	8	
Casual work	26	32	24	
Trading vegetables	12	4	4	
Government child support	22	14	14	

Village chickens from the rural areas are then sold to vendors located in the Central Business Districts. Most vendors (77%) are women, aged 20 to 70 years, with experience ranging from less than five to more than 30 years. Village chickens are mostly purchased by Africans and Asians, with different breeds in demand depending on the purpose of buying, such as consumption or cultural activities.

Table 2: The demographics of village chicken vendors participating in the informal value chain

Demographic characteristics	Durban%	Pietermaritzburg%	P Value
Gender of the trader			
Female	100	77	*
Male	0	23	
Age of the trader (years)			
20 to 30	16	0	NS
30 to 40	21	15	
40 to 50	21	62	
50 to 60	26	15	
60 to 70	16	8	
Duration of trading (years)			
Less than 5	21	13	*
More than 5	5	41	
More than 10	21	28	
More than 20	21	15	
More than 30	32	3	
Major source of income			
Vending other commodities	47	54	NS
Pensioner	0	0	
Vegetables	0	8	
Chickens	53	38	
Purpose of selling			
Income	100	100	NS
Barter exchange	0	0	
Leisure	0	0	
Training of village chicken vendors			
Training attended	0	11	
Not attended training	100	89	*
Interest to attend	85	95	
No interest in attending	15	5	*
Access to extension officer	8	5	
No access to extension officer	92	95	*

Source: Tenza, Mhlongo (7)

Conclusion

The informal value chain of village chickens is dominated by women. Interventions that can enhance this informal market are better access to more formal markets and commercialization. This is an opportunity for women's empowerment through the provision of scientific knowledge, opportunities, information, support and recognition. There is a need to be strategic planning in increasing the quantity and quality of village chickens, which requires inputs such as feed, disease control, record keeping, housing and bio-security measures. Training in resource-poor communities, particularly scientific training, is essential if village farmers want to raise chickens for the purposes of profit rather than only subsistence.

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