
Community Animal Health Workers Support Small-Scale Livestock Production

Brian Flanagan

Editors: ECHO will be hosting a three-day workshop (<https://www.echocommunity.org/en/resources/5a49260e-e938-40fa-ae8e-ea862ca5745f>) in September at our Florida campus, on the topic of small-scale livestock production in the tropics (see the “Upcoming Events” section for details). Our Global Farm incorporates many animals, including ducks, rabbits, chickens, pigs, and goats—so the workshop will be very hands-on and practical. In this article, ECHO staff member Brian Flanagan shares some of the reasons that farm animals are important to small-scale farmers; some constraints faced by these farmers; and information about Community Animal Health Workers (CAHW) and the difference they can make in farming communities.

Farm animals are important to most small-scale farmers around the world, contributing to livelihoods and increasing food security. Livestock offer even the world's most marginalized people a source of food and means of earning an income through the meat, milk, eggs, live animals and manure that are produced. Raising livestock also improves smallholders' overall farming systems (e.g. animal manure fertilizes croplands; some livestock are used to plow land and for transportation). Finally, livestock increase the resilience of smallholder families in the face of economic and other challenges, such as unpredictable or extreme weather, crop pests and diseases, and low commodity prices (ILRI 2009).

While livestock are essential to many families' economies, smallholder farmers raising livestock in developing countries face difficult constraints. For example, they may have inadequate or complete lack of land, limited access to feed or access only to poor-quality feed, poor animal health, etc. (Brown 2003).

Smallholder farmers and development workers have addressed these constraints in many practical ways. One such solution is to train local community members in basic animal health care through community animal health worker programs.

The term “community animal health worker” (CAHW) is used for a range of primary-level veterinary workers including community-based animal health workers, para-vets, and barefoot vets (Martin Curran and MacLehose 2011). The CAHW concept seems to have stemmed from observations within the human health sector, such as the barefoot doctor method used in China. The barefoot doctors were often illiterate farmers who were trained to record births and deaths, vaccinate against smallpox and other diseases, and provide basic first aid and health education talks. By 1972, an estimated one million barefoot doctors were serving a rural population of 800 million people in the People's Republic of China where doctors and other health professionals could not reach.



Figure 3. CAHW vaccination of a pig in Haiti.

Photo: Floyd Keith Flanagan

One of the first major CAHW undertakings occurred in the 1970s, when the World Bank encouraged livestock producer associations to use grassroots level para-veterinarians to attend to rural livestock. Subsequently, various non-governmental organizations (NGO) and governments have used and refined the model to meet communities' animal health needs (Tunbridge 2005). The CAHW model grew quickly in the 1990s and has frequently been adopted by NGOs (Leyland et al. 2014). In 2003, a comprehensive study estimated that CAHW programs have been implemented in 47 different countries within all continents (Grahn and Leyland 2005).

CAHW programs around the world vary depending on factors such as

funding, local culture, the extent of government involvement and community participation, the amount of training given to CAHWs, and available resources and needs. In the right context, CAHWs can provide preventive, diagnostic, and curative animal health services to the local community (Catley et al. 2002).

Overall, CAHW programs are most successful when 1) the community workers live—and probably grew up—in the local community they serve, and 2) they have a basic level of training in the services and knowledge they will be sharing with the community (Catley and Leyland 2002). The programs have worked best in rural communities that lack reliable access to professional animal health services, such as a veterinarian or veterinarian pharmacy, that would otherwise be able to link rural communities to larger systems (Leyland *et al.* 2014).

When well-executed, CAHW programs effectively help address the animal health needs of livestock holders. This support, in turn, provides stability to vulnerable smallholders who rely on livestock for income and food. ECHO's September workshop on livestock production will cover many important basic animal health topics and animal management practices; the information will be useful for development workers who may or may not have access to CAHW programs.

References

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