

Good Practice Brief

Towards Good Livestock Policies: Backyard Poultry Farming through Self-Help Groups in West Bengal

This Good Practice Note reviews the Family-based Poultry Distribution Scheme of the Government of West Bengal and shows that backyard poultry farming contributes to household food security, generates self-employment, empowers rural women as well as bridges the gap between demand and supply of eggs and poultry meat in rural areas of West Bengal.



✦ *Between 2005 and 2008 a centrally sponsored Family-based Poultry Distribution Scheme has distributed 5 million birds to about 500,000 rural beneficiary households.*

✦ *Beneficiary households have increased their consumption of eggs, with positive returns in terms of household nutrition and health.*

✦ *Beneficiary households get a gross monthly income from egg sale ranging between Rs. 120-720.*

✦ *Beneficiary households can sell live birds, which are valued between Rs 60-100/kg live weight to face unexpected shocks/outlays*



✦ *Women Self-Help Groups (SHGs) have been selected as beneficiaries and trained in poultry economics and management.*

✦ *The Scheme is highly bankable, with the returns in terms of income largely offsetting the public costs.*

Background

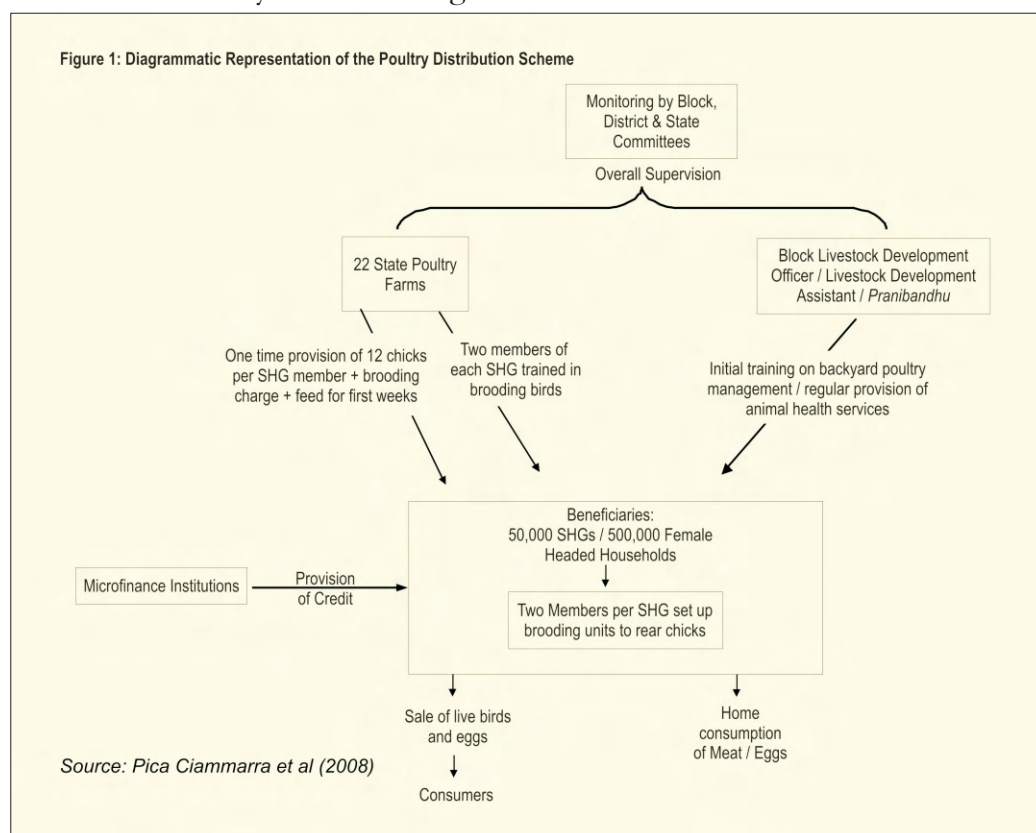
The eastern state of West Bengal has a long tradition of Backyard Poultry. In India, it ranks third in terms of poultry population (61 million), records the highest poultry density (683 birds/sq km) and boasts the highest per-capita consumption of eggs (34 eggs/year)¹. As much as 49% of rural households, belonging to different communities, castes and classes, keep some poultry birds. Backyard Poultry is mainly practiced by women, where a small flock (2-10) of *Desi*² birds is reared by scavenging on kitchen waste, insects/worms and available crop residues. Small improvements in backyard poultry production systems could thus directly contribute to rural development and accelerate poverty reduction in West Bengal.

How did the Good Practice Work?

In 2005, the Directorate of Animal Resources and Animal Health (DARAH)³ of the State Government of West Bengal introduced a Family-based poultry scheme - 'Distribution of cocks, drakes and cockerels' whereby 22 State Poultry Farms distributed poultry birds - Rhode Island Red (RIR) and Khaki Campbell Duck - to rural households to enhance food security and generate employment for marginalised and deprived sections of the rural society. The Scheme works as follow:

During each fiscal year DARAH allocates a programme budget – which totaled Rs 1,463.00 lakhs (about US\$ 3 million) over the period 2005-2008 – and subsequently identifies target blocks for distribution of poultry birds. DARAH selects blocks with at least one Block Animal Health Centre (BAHC)⁴ so as to ensure that beneficiary households get access to animal health services. Within

each block, the local Gram Panchayat selects the target beneficiaries among women SHGs. Each beneficiary household receives 10 day-old-chicks (DOCs), plus another 2 to cater for losses, along with feed to rear them to the age of 4 weeks, and pays Rs 1 per DOC to the Block Livestock Development Officer (BLDO). RIR chicks were distributed to beneficiary households, as under semi-scavenging conditions they have proven more



productive in terms of eggs laid and gain in body weight compared to *Desi* chicken. DARAH

¹FAO (2008) www.faostat.fao.org ; GoWB (2004) West Bengal Human Development Report 2004. Development and Planning Department, Government of West Bengal, Kolkata

²Indigenous or Local

³www.darahwb.org

⁴With the view to improve the efficacy of animal health services in rural areas, the 2004-2005 State Plan of West Bengal have institutionalized community animal health workers, called *Pranibandhus*. The government expects to have one *Pranibandhu* per Gram Panchayat (local government at the village level) to provide first aid, basic curative and preventive health care to livestock and poultry at affordable charges.

simultaneously implements a 'Poultry Rearing Units Scheme' to reduce mortality rates in DOCs and ensure the scheme's sustainability. Selected Self-Help-Groups are given 5 to 7 days training along with feeders, waterers and other equipment to establish small scale brooding units, where about 250-300 DOCs could be raised for about 3-4 weeks before being distributed to beneficiary households. Similarly one-day training on poultry management is given to all beneficiaries who receive RIR DOC.

In the time period between 2005 - 2008, DARAHA have distributed about 5 million birds to around 500,000 households, which allegedly made the Poultry Distribution Scheme the largest poultry programme in India, if not worldwide. The direct and the indirect impacts of the scheme include:

- ☞ Increased egg consumption of beneficiary households, resulting in improved health and better nutritional levels amongst household members along with additional food security.
- ☞ Regular flow of income generated through sale of surplus eggs that fetch a market price of Rs. 2 to 4 per egg.
- ☞ Reduced vulnerability for beneficiary households, who have diversified their activity portfolio and increased their ability to face unexpected shocks and outlays through selling live birds when needed.
- ☞ Women empowerment as target beneficiaries were women SHGs.

There are three innovative elements which are contributing to the effectiveness of the Scheme. Firstly, birds are distributed only to members of women SHGs, thereby generating a form of peer-pressure and strengthening social connections; secondly, two members in each SHG are trained to properly manage brooding units to rear DOCs to guarantee distribution of healthy 3-4 week old chicks, thereby reducing the mortality of birds; lastly credit service activities are initiated and sustained by the SHG, partly through liaison with other schemes of Rural Development Department and through income from brooding units (SHG level) and poultry rearing (HH level).

Critical Findings

This Family-based Poultry Distribution Scheme represents a promising development policy, though its long-term sustainability success will depend on how the Government will address some emerging issues:

- ➔ Beneficiary households with no/limited experience in poultry farming and no/inadequate access to scavenging areas tend to sell / consume their birds, rather than setting up viable backyard poultry businesses. Selection and training of beneficiaries should be therefore revised and adjusted.
- ➔ Receiving DOCs at subsidized rates without any accountability often leads to lack of proper care and management, with many farmers under-investing in complementary yet crucial production inputs (e.g. shelter for birds) and are unable to continue rearing Backyard poultry unit. In addition, since few brooding units have been sponsored and established so far, relatively high mortality of DOCs forced some households out of poultry farming.
- ➔ Though RIR has the advantage of producing more number of eggs and has adapted to local agro-climatic conditions, broodiness in RIR is lesser than the *Desi* birds, making beneficiaries dependent on the State for getting additional DOCs. This poses question on the sustainability of the Scheme. Given that farmers are willing to pay DOCs at market prices, Public Private Partnerships could be developed to supply quality DOC to the rearers at market price or on a cost-recovery basis.

- In spite of the provision of an in-built animal health support system in the scheme, birds still die of Ranikhet (Newcastle) disease and fowl pox, indicating inadequacies in the delivery of these services. The government could shift some Scheme resources to strengthen the public provision of basic vaccinations and health care as small scale poultry is facing grave threat from H5N1 outbreaks and basic Bio security measures need to be in place.
- In spite of the massive distribution of public birds in rural areas by DARA, public animal health institutions continue prioritizing large ruminants' vis-à-vis small ruminants and poultry. For instance, *Pranibandhus*, who are trained in primary health care for large/small ruminants and artificial insemination, seldom consider small ruminants and poultry as a source of income. A more balanced delivery of public animal health services, including large and small ruminants as well as poultry, and revised curricula for *Pranibandhus* may be critical elements for strengthening the Poultry distribution Scheme and ensure the sustainability of the backyard poultry farming in rural areas in the medium to long-term

What and Where Next?

The Poultry-Distribution Scheme of the Government of West Bengal has so far achieved significant results, in terms of improved food security and income for rural households, though some adjustments in the Scheme can make it much more effective. In particular, given that the Scheme is highly bankable, because the benefits are much larger than the costs, a question is whether the Government should simply scale it up or whether it makes sense to investigate the possibility of a public-private partnership to expand the distribution of DOCs – which are a private good – and allocate the saved resources towards improved efficiency in the provision of animal health and extension services to small poultry farmers. In any case, the Scheme can be a source of ideas and inspiration for Indian Policy makers, as it shows unambiguously how public investments in backyard poultry farming have effectively and efficiently contributed to enhanced food security and better livelihoods for small and marginal rural households.

SOUTH ASIA Pro Poor Livestock Policy Programme

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