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## **OPINION**

## Chickens as Well as Cheetahs: Biodiversity Conservation Must Also Include Livestock

By Christian Tiambo

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n farmer with her chicken, Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Credit: ILRI/Apollo Habtamu

CALI, Colombia, Oct 29 2024 (IPS) - As the UN's COP16 biodiversity conference continues, the temptation is to focus on the wild flora and fauna under threat.

But there is another, less obvious yet just as critical biodiversity crisis unfolding around the world that also deserves attention.

A quarter of livestock breeds - from chickens, ducks and geese to horses, camels and cattle - are classified at risk extinction. Even more concerning is the fact that a lack of data means the status of more than 50 per cent of breeds remains unknown. More than 200 livestock breeds have gone extinct since 2000, some without having ever been recorded.

Just 40 out of thousands of species of mammals and birds have been domesticated for food and agriculture yet the domesticated food-producing animals contribute an average of 40 per cent of the world's agricultural gross domestic product. Eight of these species provide more than 95 per cent of the human food supply from livestock.

The erosion of local and locally adapted livestock diversity poses an especially serious threat to developing countrie where livestock-keeping generates as much as 80 per cent of agricultural GDP, providing much-needed food, fibre, fuel and draught power

A shrinking pool of commercially improved livestock provides increasingly limited potential for animals to support for security, economic growth, climate adaptation and even ecosystem services that protect biodiversity more broadly. Maintaining agricultural biodiversity is essential for diverse, healthy diets and resilient, diversified forms of rural livelihoods.

It is therefore vital that negotiators at COP16 include livestock as well as wildlife in their National Biodiversity Strategies and Adaptation Plans (NBSAPs), including agreements to compensate countries for indigenous livestock DNA sequences.

As a minimum, countries should include specific targets for protecting livestock breeds within their NBSAPs to help enshrine the preservation of genetic diversity.

Setting actionable targets is a fundamental step towards maintaining a rich variety of livestock breeds, which is essential for breeding more resilient, heat tolerant and healthy animals.

The ability to improve livestock and make use of the locally adapted characteristics of indigenous breeds is becomin increasingly valuable as the impacts of climate change threaten conventional and exotic breeds. The diversity of loc locally adapted and non-conventional livestock constitute an essential resource that will ensure animal production is able to adapt to climate change, respond to new market opportunities and deal with new disease threats.

For example, the hardy Red Maasai sheep that is indigenous to East Africa and can cope with arid and hot condition was on the brink of extinction after many farmers replaced their flocks with South Africa's Dorper breed to produce more meat. But unlike the Red Maasai, Dorper sheep are less able to thrive in drought conditions. Thankfully, the preservation of the Red Maasai by researchers at the International Livestock Research Institute's (ILRI) Kapiti Research Station has supported their reintroduction, as well as crossbreeding programs to harness the beneficial traits of both.

Plans to compensate countries for recording such genetic resources, known as digital sequence information, and th associated traditional knowledge, must include livestock so that countries across Africa and the Global South can benefit and use this funding to re-invest in livestock conservation.

Countries should also include protections for the conservation of forages that feed livestock and wild herbivores in their NBSAPs. This is equally important for identifying resilient and low-emissions crops that can meet the nutritional needs of livestock.

Koronivia grass, for example, is native to Africa and is among the collection of germplasm stored at the Future Seed genebank in Colombia. Breeders produced an improved variety of the grass that was shown to increase levels of sc carbon on tropical savannas by 15 per cent while also reducing nitrous oxide (N2O) emissions from grazing cattle by a factor of 10.

Leveraging the full range of the world's biodiversity can unlock improved breeds and varieties of forages to support

Alonaside such protections for genetic resources and agricultural biodiversity, governments should also include sustainable livestock production within their NBSAPs to support rangeland restoration and achieve their biodiversity goals.

Livestock systems that integrate sustainable practices like managed grazing can enhance soil health, increase carb sequestration, and promote ecosystem diversity while generating emissions that are comparable to wild herbivores.

For example, livestock manure already provides 14 per cent of the nitrogen used for crop production globally and a quarter of that used for crop production on mixed crop-and-livestock farms. These closed nutrient cycles replenish soils with nitrogen while also enhancing soil structure and organic matter, improving the nutrient- and water-holding capacities of soils and reducing soil erosion.

The natural world thrives when the balance of biodiversity is maintained, and this includes local and non-convention livestock as well as wild animals

For the countries where the right livestock breeds can determine hunger or health, poverty or prosperity, it is essent that the biodiversity talks include cattle, pigs and chickens alongside pandas, rhinos and cheetahs.

To fully take advantage of the diversity of livestock, the global community must conserve genetic resources and put them to use to enable communities to cope with climate change, meet changing market demands, resist diseases, and enhance global food security.

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