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PUBLICATION

Fact Check 1: Livestock and Livelihoods



FACT CHECK



Livestock and Livelihoods

Do livestock support the livelihoods of around one billion poor people globally?



June 2018 - Fact Check 1

Numerous publications refer to 'one billion' poor people whose livelihoods depend on livestock. In the majority of cases, the fact gives scale to the importance of livestock to the world's poorest populations.¹ However, the fact is often quoted without clear provenance², or with reference to another source using the fact, rather than the original calculating source³.

Where does the fact originate?

The commonly quoted 'one billion' can be traced back to a figure calculated in 1999 by a group called Livestock in Development, they estimated 887 million smallholder farmers were dependent on livestock. This calculation was based on global livestock keeper agro-ecological distribution, reported by Searle and Steinfield in 1996⁴, and poverty statistics from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1997⁵. Searle and Steinfield had based livestock keeper distributions on 1991-93 data from AGROSTAT, now called

Moving livestock in Tanzania, University of Glasgow/SEI, 2017

FAOSTAT⁶, whilst the UNDP poverty statistics used a composite measure of poverty, with information cited as 'correspondence on the Gini coefficient' from the World Resources Institute in 1996. No further information about this correspondence could be ascertained.

Is the fact up-to-date and relevant?

Effectively, the 'one billion' figure is based on an 19-year-old calculation, using information from 22-year-old publications, which refer to statistics up to 27 years old. Since 1999 the global population has grown from 6.1 to 7.5 billion⁷, with growth concentrated in Low to Middle income countries, unlikely to slow anytime soon⁸. In addition, the global definition of 'poor' is dynamic. For instance the World Bank's dollar-a-day indicator, tracking the 'the share of individuals that have to live on less than an absolute minimum' has been adjusted three times since its conception in 1990⁹. Therefore, any recalculation is unlikely to give the same 'one billion' as calculated in 1999.

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The commonly quoted ‘one billion’ can be traced back to a figure calculated in 1999 by a group called ‘Livestock in Development’, they estimated 987 million smallholder farmers were dependent on livestock¹. This calculation was based on global livestock keeper agroecological distribution, reported by Seré and Steinfeld in 1996⁴, and poverty statistics from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1997⁵. Seré and Steinfeld had based livestock keeper distributions on 1991-93 data from AGROSTAT, now called FAOSTAT⁶; whilst the UNDP poverty statistics used a composite measure of poverty, with information cited as “correspondence on the Gini coefficient” from the World Resources Institute in 1996. No further information about this correspondence could be ascertained.

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Have there been updates and can we see any trends?

It is unlikely that in 2018 the actual number of poor people who rely on livestock to support their livelihood is 'one billion'. Populations are constantly changing (mainly increasing), as is the definition of 'poor'. There are more recent estimates of the number of poor people whose livelihoods are supported by livestock. For instance, when attempting to determine the geographic location of poor livestock keepers, both Thornton and co-authors in 2002⁹ and Robinson and co-authors in 2011¹⁰ provided population numbers. Respectively, they suggested figures of 556 million⁹ and 766 million¹⁰ poor livestock keepers.

Notably, both these estimates had some basis on the original Livestock in Development calculations; however, their data sources, thresholds for the definition of poverty and broader methodologies varied. For this reason, it would be inappropriate to infer any temporal trends for the number of poor livestock keepers.

The future of this fact

It may be informative to have a more dynamic estimation of this figure. However, the demand and urgency for such an undertaking depends largely on the application of such information. Generally, the figure is used to make a strong statement on the importance of livestock, where precision matters less than the implications of a big number.

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