



GLOBAL AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE LIVESTOCK

GOOD PRACTICE GUIDELINE

The DERA. A Traditional Shepherding Institution in Rajasthan (India)

KEY MESSAGES:

1. The dera is an effective indigenous institution for accessing resources throughout a nomadic migration cycle.
2. Multiple threats to nomadic peoples require a collaborative coordinated response.
3. A dera is composed of 8-12 family units that support each other and are led by a patel who makes decisions on when and where to migrate.
4. The leadership qualities of the patel are instrumental in maintaining harmony in the group and with external actors including land owners and officials.

The *Dera*. A Traditional Shepherding Institution in Rajasthan (India)

Overview of practice

In Rajasthan, the desert state in the west of India, sheep production is a major economic activity generating an estimated EURO 28 million in sales of live animals from producers to traders, annually. This translates into about 22 million kg of mutton per year, all produced on “waste” or excess biomass that would otherwise not be utilized.

The majority of Rajasthan’s sheep are kept in nomadic systems by the Raika pastoralist community, but also other castes such as Gujjar, Rajput and Sindhi Muslims. They go on long-distance migration during about nine months out of the year. During this time, they graze their flocks on harvested fields and on common property.

resources; in addition they lop trees for leaf fodder. On their migration they face multiple challenges and security threats due to changing crop cycles, construction of roads and fences, intensifying competition for resources, and the increase of theft (due to high meat prices). As an individual family cannot cope with these threats, the Raika form herding groups (*dera*)

of 8-12 families that stay together for the whole migration cycle and support each other, according to common norms that are ingrained in their social fabric. They average 3000-5000 sheep, hundreds of goats (mostly as nursemaids for the lambs), 10-20 camels, and often dozens of donkeys



Approach

It is a challenging logistic task to daily find places for thousands of sheep to graze and to obtain permission and favourable conditions from land owners for staying overnight on their fields. Due to intensifying competition for land, hostile and unpleasant interactions with officials from the Forest Department, the police and farmers are all part of the routine. In addition, theft of sheep by organized gangs that attack at night, is a regular occurrence. A single family or small group of them would not be able to cope with all these challenges, it requires close collaboration of a larger number of people.

The *dera* is led by a *patel* who makes all decisions with respect to moving and on whose local connections it depends on where the *dera* can stay overnight and use resources. When the *dera* is on the move it resembles a small army. It uses camels and/or donkeys to transport utensils, bedding, small children and newborn animals. But most members of the herding group walk the entire distance. The *dera* moves in a characteristic fashion. The camels, usually led by women, are in front, followed by donkeys in a throng, then the individual family flocks, and finally the lambs in separate groups. The composition of a *dera* in terms of family units (*dholri*) fluctuates from year to year. It is up to the *patel* to accept families to join his group, and up to the families to decide which *dera* they would like to join.

Basically, a patel will choose mainly relatives to be in his dera and before allowing anybody else to join he will find out the background and reputation of the person, which dera they were previous with, and whether there was any trouble.

Benefits of the Practice

This is an indigenous institution that optimally ensures the security of shepherds on migration, functions according to strict rules and in which every member has precisely defined duties, largely according to gender. Without being organized into deras, sheep pastoralism would not be possible and the entire sheep economy would collapse. An additional benefit is the significant amounts of organic manure that the sheep deposit on the fields and for which many farmers are willing to pay a good price, as chemical fertilizer is more expensive and has negative effects on the soils in this area.



Key Characteristics required for success

Leadership in form of a patel that can make wise decisions in the frequent emergencies that always occur during migration is very important. Key factors for supporting this institution would include awareness and appreciation among officials and policy makers about the benefits of migratory sheep pastoralism for the economy and ecology of the region, securing and maintenance of migratory routes, and protection from thieves.

The Good Practice Guidelines intend to provide practical operational information related to the Global Agenda for Sustainable Livestock Focus Area 2: Restoring Value to Grasslands. The information has been drawn from a global inventory of pilot sites connected to FA2. This guideline aligns with FA2 Theme 1 Enabling Institutions. Please visit www.livestockdialogue.org for more information.

CONTACT INFORMATION

**Ilse Köhler-Rollefson and
Hanwant Singh Rathore**

LokhitPashu-PalakSansthan (LPPS)
Butibagh, near Mammaji-ki-dhuni
Alsipura, via Rajpura

Sadri 306702, District Pali, Rajasthan, India

e-mail: lpps.sadri1996@gmail.com,
ilse@pastoralpeoples.org

FURTHER READING

AUTHORS

Hanwant Singh is director of Lokhit Pashu-Palak Sansthan, an NGO that has been supporting Rajasthan's pastoralists since 1996.

Ilse Köhler-Rollefson is project coordinator of the League for Pastoral Peoples and Endogenous Livestock Development (LPP).

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this brief are those of the authors and are not necessarily endorsed by or representative of GASL or of the cosponsoring or supporting organizations.

DATE PUBLISHED

June 2016