

# Indigenous Backyard Poultry

*Lucrative Livelihood for Landless, Small and Marginal Farmers, and Women*



## Introduction

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Poultry production with indigenous breeds, that forage for food, is commonly referred to as free-range or backyard poultry. The essence of backyard poultry is the negligible expense on feed, and involves the production of chicks in-house, independent of feed mills and hatcheries. As marginal and landless farmers especially women have recognized its potential, it is emerging as a critical source of better livelihood for rural communities.

The essence of Backyard Poultry is the negligible expense on feed, and involves the production of chicks in-house, independent of feed mills and hatcheries. Its importance can be gauged by a simple fact that a unit of four hens and one cock fetches a higher income than one acre of dryland without any intervention.

Rainfed Livestock Network (RLN) has been working on BYP-related initiatives for a significant amount of time and has recognized the crucial role of BYP in rural livelihoods. Although the income generated from BYP is hidden and inconspicuous, BYP brings value both in terms of providing nutrition, especially protein (meat and eggs), as well as income to the household. Moreover the income goes directly to women who manage the poultry.

The importance of backyard poultry can be gauged by a simple comparison: a unit of four hens and one cock in a year fetches a farmer a higher income (without any intervention) than from one acre of dryland agriculture in any part of the country. This is due to the fact that eggs from these birds fetch at least twice the amount from that of commercial poultry eggs while their meat fetches almost triple the amount as compared to that of commercial poultry.

The system of indigenous poultry production is based on the motherly instincts of the birds that train their offspring to feed, and escape from predators - this behaviour cannot be inculcated in machine-bred chicks' production systems. BYP production, if dealt with in the right way is an answer to the larger goal of ensuring sustainability in farming systems and is best suited to meet the government objectives on doubling the farmers' incomes by 2020.

After a thorough survey, Karnataka was selected for the study because it has the largest number of indigenous poultry birds in the country; even within the state the number of indigenous birds is higher than the number of birds raised in commercial units. About 50 per cent of all eggs consumed in the state are from these indigenous birds and there is a preference for the meat of these birds in the region. Many rural households in Bagalkot district in north Karnataka, where it exists in a more evolved form, have adopted backyard poultry. A few households have even scaled it up using their own ingenuity and low-cost technology, resulting in doubling their incomes. In cases where all interventions are in place, traditional income has increased significantly. In some cases, it has even become the primary source of income for the small and marginal farmer. Backyard poultry in Bagalkot district has been scaled up from being a consumption-based production system to a micro-entrepreneurial one.

## Recommendations

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- Recognizing and characterizing area-specific indigenous poultry breeds is critical, towards ensuring livelihood security for rural poor.
- Area-specific indigenous poultry breeds need to be promoted over improved and exotic breeds, as they ensure sustainability of poultry-centered livelihood initiatives due to their ability to self propagate under negligible production costs.
- Training and capacity building initiatives need to focus on promoting integrated farming systems i.e both crop-livestock production rather than crop-specific practices.
- An enabling environment needs to be built for indigenous poultry producers to enable them access to diverse markets by reducing supply chain problems and better access to proper transport and cold storage facilities.
- A dynamic pricing strategy must be evolved for the most preferred indigenous poultry breeds with transparency at every level for sustained production.

## Background

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Future Greens, an NGO working with farm-based livelihoods across Bagalkot and Belagavi districts in northwest Karnataka, has been rejuvenating small and marginal farming systems through better institutional mechanisms. When an assessment of their backyard poultry initiatives was undertaken, it was discovered that three new models were in use wherein the local communities themselves were found to be scaling up backyard poultry production through innovative ways:

Innovation 1 - includes rearing flocks in a village atmosphere in front of the house without any private spaces for enclosing the birds. The only investment is a shelter made of mud and bricks for the birds to be safe at night and a secure place brooding hens.

Innovation 2 - comprises of a “foraging system” located on farmlands with secure shelter during night hours. This includes a well-built safety shed, where hatching and brooding occurs in closed enclosures.

Innovation 3 - Uses backyard spaces of the house that is fenced off to prevent predators coupled with minimal investment on housing. This innovation has ample scope for chicks getting trained by hens and is still a free-range system that incorporates unique low-cost feeding practice.

All these systems have been scaled up by farmers to keeping 60-75 birds; with both preventive vaccination and traditional methods of health care where required with minimal supplemental feed; leading to significant increase in incomes. To improve the socio-economic status of the traditional poultry farmers, these systems are promising enterprises with low-cost initial investment, but high economic returns including improved nutritional and economic security to poorer households.

## Key Findings

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1. Backyard poultry is a zero to low input micro-enterprise with high replicability and most suited for small and marginal farm families. Being primarily a women-managed enterprise, the drudgery women face

in comparison to other farm-based activities is negligible, and hence an effective and suitable source of livelihood particularly for women.

2. Studies indicate that adoption of simple management techniques has led to substantial reduction in mortality, with survival rate of the birds improving from 30-40 per cent to 70 per cent. These systems are independent of hatcheries and chick suppliers and feed mills, a key feature of ensuring continuity and sustainability.
3. The improved systems ensure that the birds get regular exercise and still feed on a variety of herbs and insects, which has led to an improvement in the general health of the birds. Additionally, birds raised under this system comply with proper animal welfare standards, which is also important for urban consumers and niche markets.
4. *In situ* manuring that allows decomposition of poultry droppings and associated increase in crop yield is the advantage for small and marginal farmers; and a strategy that can be an integral part of the organic farming concepts.
5. Backyard poultry production was found to be highly lucrative for small and marginal households over crop production in *Bagalkot* district. Locally, farmers are earning an average income of Rs.18,000/- per season from one acre of vegetable cultivation and upto Rs.40,000/- per acre per year from sugarcane cultivation. However, average income from poultry production i.e innovation models 1 and 2 is providing the household an average income of Rs.1,15,000/- per year - a far higher than income earned per acre from irrigated agriculture.

## Conclusion

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The backyard poultry production innovations discussed above defies the logic that there are limits to generating income from indigenous poultry production beyond a certain level. The popular premise that improved breeds like Giriraja (among many others) are more efficient as backyard birds than indigenous breeds do not hold any more since they call for regular purchase of chicks, other external feed, medication and vaccines. These input-driven

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models are beyond the reach of small, marginal and landless communities. Apart from this, improved breeds of poultry lack the essential elements required for production under free-range systems. A small tweaking in the housing and predation prevention measures ensures that indigenous birds can prove to be more efficient in terms of enhancing livelihoods.

The absence of government policies for the promotion of indigenous breeds is creating roadblocks for scaling up this production system. The fact that the women farmers are themselves finding innovative solutions to address the rising market demands, is proof of the need for state interventions. The system of indigenous poultry production is based on the motherly instincts of the birds that train their offspring to feed, and escape from predators - this behavior cannot be inculcated in machine-bred chicks' production systems. backyard poultry production, if dealt with in the right way is an answer to the larger goal of ensuring sustainability in farming systems and is the best suited to meet the government objectives on doubling the farmers' incomes by 2020.

## Way forward

Markets exist for every agricultural produce in India, but the challenge is to build consistent supply chains to reach the end consumer. In this context the way forward is to:

1. Focus efforts towards leveraging benefits from ongoing government programs like MGNREGA where small and marginal households can get infrastructure such as predator-proof housing for indigenous poultry production, which will help augment production.
2. Synergizing with Farmer Producer Organizations (FPOs) will help promote the innovative models that are appropriate for the local climate as well as provide an opportunity to create support infrastructure that will allow the FPOs to connect with end consumers for improved sale of local birds.
3. Organic farming initiatives can be augmented with initiatives in backyard poultry; with standards approved by APEDA for organic certification that includes assurance on quality and authenticity.

## Thematic Partner

This work on behalf of the Rainfed Livestock Network has been led by Network Partner Future Greens Samsthe. For more information contact [futuregreens.org@gmail.com](mailto:futuregreens.org@gmail.com)

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“The Rainfed Livestock Network is a consortium of organisations anchored by the Foundation for Ecological Security. The Network’s objective is to strengthen the knowledge, information and analytical base on livestock rearing, with specific reference to arid and semi-arid regions, required to encourage and support favourable policies, planning and increase public investment for livestock development in these regions.

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