

# Cattle path to a



Increased cattle productivity is ‘money in the bank’ and a clear pathway out of poverty for villagers in eastern Indonesia, reports Sean Murphy from ABC Landline

PHOTOS BY GAVIN MARSH/ABC TV

**T**hey are the cash cows of eastern Indonesia. Bali beef is the major breed of Australia’s near neighbour and in places such as Kelebeh village, in central Lombok, they are an important measure of family wealth and wellbeing. Queensland University economist Dr Arlene Rutherford is working with villagers on how best to maximise returns on their increased production.

“They’re extremely important, they’re part of the crop livestock system that is their life basically, so they’ve maintained cattle for more years than we know,” Dr Rutherford says. “That’s the origin of the Lombok and Bali cattle and they rely on them for cash and for their savings. When they need to send their children to school or for any other emergencies, then they sell their cattle.”

At the village of Kelebeh, ACIAR researchers are helping villagers improve the productivity of their cattle. They have introduced simple animal husbandry practices such as controlled mating, early weaning, better hygiene and improved nutrition.

In collaboration with Indonesian agencies such as the Centre for Agro-Socioeconomic Research, the project has had a dramatic impact.

At Kelebeh’s communal kandang (animal feedlot) the number

of calves per year has almost doubled and they are reaching market weight in half the time they used to.

The average annual income in Indonesia is just over A\$1000 per person. On Lombok though, it is more like \$200 – that is about the value of a heifer or young bull, so even a very modest increase in productivity can have a dramatic impact.

“The main thing is people don’t want to increase their cattle herds, they want to push them through faster, because they don’t have enough feed to double the numbers or enough time in the day to carry the water,” Dr Rutherford says. “So what it does is basically give them a calf every year instead of every 18 months or perhaps two years, and then they can raise them or fatten them at a young age so they can sell them off quicker.

“We don’t presume that we know their system, so you go in very open-minded and discuss and discuss until you have some idea about the system. So for this project we didn’t come in with a set number of interventions at a particular time of year. We had to talk to farmers, talk to other people in the industry as well, and then see what was possible or what was best for them and let them work with us to decide on that.”

Across Indonesia there is a growing demand for beef, but the



# brighter future

peasant farmers who produce 80 per cent of the nation's 2.5 million Bali cattle are not benefiting financially.

According to Dr Rutherford, a big part of the problem is a lack of transparency in the market system. Farmers are discouraged from attending sale yards where brokers and traders operate a closed shop.

"Well, as in any business, the middlemen have the opportunity to make more money, especially if the information isn't given back to the producer," she says. "And I don't believe it's too hard to actually give this information back to the producer ... such as radio announcements to let them know the prices of beef and live cattle in Jakarta."

The early successes of ACIAR's beef project have resulted in a surge of applications for membership of the communal kandang at Kelebu.

And some of those members, like mother of three Zakir, are keen to draw from the well of ownership success: "Yes, I see the benefits, that's why I'm raising cattle now, we really wish to own our own cattle and I now believe this is going to happen," she says.

Lombok's regional government is supporting the project with low-cost loans for buying cattle. Governor Lalu Serenata grew up in a small, impoverished village not unlike Kelebu. He says ACIAR's work has the potential to greatly improve the lives of individuals but also to build bridges between cultures.

"Of course this is going to improve the relationship between Indonesia and Australia," he says. "Let's say we have different ethnicity, we are mainly Muslim people but all human beings are equal. We are neighbours and according to Islam sharing kindness with others brings us all closer together."

The benefits to Australia extend well beyond mere goodwill. All ACIAR projects are also intended to reap a research dividend to Australia.

In the case of its Bali beef project, producing more home-grown beef for an expanding middle class is also likely to bring direct economic benefits through greater Australian imports.

"As people's incomes increase, which is happening in Indonesia especially, they demand more meat protein or animal protein," Dr Rutherford says. "They switch away from the cereal protein sources, so what they tend to do is eat more beef or chicken and those kinds of things by preference. So you can imagine, with the population of Indonesia, even by increasing a few kilograms a year the ensuing demand is huge.

"The consumption locally here is very small – it's perhaps two kilograms a year compared to perhaps 40 kilograms of beef in Australia."

Ultimately, ACIAR's work in Indonesia and throughout the Asia-Pacific is about finding common ground.

"So that's the most important thing, and I think cattle people are cattle people everywhere," Dr Rutherford says. "If you love animals or cattle you'll respond to that as well. Whether you're an Australian cattle person or an Indonesian cattle person, there's a common language there already."



Dr Arlene Rutherford

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