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Introduction

What are traditional chickens? They are those free-roaming chickens kept by individual households in most rural villages in underdeveloped countries. They make up 75 to 90% of the total poultry population in these countries. In English they are also known as indigenous, village, foraging, scavenging, family, backyard and small-holder chickens or, simply, “road-runners”.

Why are traditional chickens so important? They are a source of high-quality protein available in many African rural households. People like chicken meat and this extensive system of keeping chickens has been practiced since chickens were domesticated about 8000 years ago. Chicken production is an important complement to the growing of vegetables.

These chickens, requiring little labour, are an excellent source of nutrition for the sick.

Low input/low output

Traditional chickens find most of their own feed, are good at hatching and mothering young chicks and they have the ability to survive under harsh conditions. Although overall production of meat and eggs is low compared to intensive poultry output, the traditional chicken costs the farmer almost nothing. The major constraints to traditional chicken production are high mortality in young chicks due to diseases, malnutrition and predation, and the decimation of flocks by Newcastle Disease (ND).

Productivity improvements

There are simple management interventions that could considerably improve the production levels of these chickens, requiring little, if any, monetary cost, only some time and attention.

Under improved conditions a flock of five breeding hens and one cock could produce at least 40 to 50 reared offspring a year.