



Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa Comprehensive African Agriculture Development Programme



Farming Livestock for Export: What Needs to Change?

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Farming livestock for export, particularly to higher value markets, means making sure that the way in which the animals are farmed will enable the final commodity to comply with international standards for trade in livestock commodities. Concepts like “farm to fork” or “stable to table” imply that the quality of the commodity will be determined by events occurring from the birth of the animal from which it is derived to the moment when it is served as part of a meal. No single person or body is responsible for the entire value chain, and only the cook can be blamed if a fine piece of meat arrives at the table as a sorry burnt offering! The farmer is responsible for the first part of the value chain, which happens on the farm, and ends when the animal leaves the farm for the feedlot or the abattoir.

What makes a good quality beef animal?

The main on-farm factors that influence the quality of beef produced by cattle are as follows:

- Breed
- Nutrition
- Health

- Husbandry system
 - Age at slaughter
- These add up to the kind of animal chosen and how it is managed.

What is good quality beef?

The perceived quality of meat depends on various factors like appearance, flavour, consistency and juiciness – in fact it depends on what the consumer wants. Since all consumers want to be sure that the meat they eat will be good for them and not make them ill, the safety of meat is a non-negotiable element of quality. This depends not only on the health of the animal from which it is derived but also from the way it is handled all the way along the value chain, with HACCP systems in place to ensure the best practice at all stages until it reaches the consumer. The other attributes cannot be cast in stone. In the highest value markets consumers are generally looking for juicy, tender steaks that require little effort to cut or to chew, but there are markets where consumers are prepared to put more energy into eating their meat and flavour rather than tenderness is the determining factor.

Selecting a breed

Various cattle breeds are famous for the beef they produce, but good beef can be obtained from any meat or dual purpose breed. There is nothing wrong with the meat of dairy cattle, either, but it is not considered profitable to raise dairy breeds for meat, as their conformation generally results in lower yields for the same amount of feed. Factors such as nutrition, health and age at slaughter are more important than breed in determining whether the meat will be of the necessary quality sought by the markets.

Nutrition, health and husbandry

The best quality meat for high value markets comes from animals that are in good condition and have not had to work too hard for their food and become tough in the process. For this reason 'grain-fed' beef from animals raised on concentrates in feedlots is widely considered the most desirable product. Especially in areas where grazing is not optimal, for example where pasture quantity or quality is insufficient and supplements are needed, producing beef in feedlots is probably the best option. This system also offers the advantage of being able to control parasites and diseases comparatively easily. However, where good pasture is available, there are consumers who prefer beef from animals raised on grass rather than grain because it is believed to have more flavour. A growing number of consumers in the highest value markets will only eat animals raised organically, i.e. under the most natural conditions possible. This is generally considered to be an expensive way to produce beef, as few or no artificial aids to pasture improvement or animal health care are permitted. Do some of the COMESA countries have an advantage in terms of good natural pasture and indigenous cattle breeds with natural resistance to disease? If so, every effort should be made to exploit this advantage. The charm of eating beef from interesting and attractive cattle breeds that have been

raised under completely natural conditions in far-away Africa could be quite irresistible!

Age at slaughter

The global trend is to slaughter young beef animals, no older than two-tooth, to obtain the highest grades of meat. In contrast, many of the cattle slaughtered in Africa are at least three years old. There are various reasons for this, but many are raised on marginal grazing that may be stocked beyond its carrying capacity as well, resulting in slow growth. The fact that meat from such animals is tougher is often worsened by the fact that the animals are in poor condition because they have never eaten really well. In many cases the only way to have young, well-grown cattle to slaughter is the feedlot route.

Is there no hope for marketing beef of poorer quality?

Provided the meat is from healthy animals, there are plenty of marketing possibilities for beef other than toothsome and tender steaks. The meat from somewhat older animals in good condition will appeal to consumers who like some bite to their steaks – Argentina produces famous steaks that are sought-after for being less tender but more tasty. For cuts or grades that are not suitable for steaks, there are many ways in which value can be added along the chain by turning the meat into suitable processed products.

Conclusion

Knowing the markets and their preferences will help COMESA to determine what if anything will need to change on the farms where beef is produced for export within the region and beyond. A major focus on ensuring the health of the animals from which the meat is to be derived is essential, as this is not negotiable. After that, ways can be explored to satisfy different market tastes and in that way to allow as many producers as possible to benefit from the system.

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