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Sustainable Livestock Production through Biodiversity Conservation, Environmental Management and Improved Public Health Outcomes

Jelang Jelku D. Sangma[1,2,3]

[1]*Department of Food Science and Nutrition, University of Agricultural Sciences, GKVK, Bangalore, Karnataka - 560065, India*
[2]*Department of Food Science and Nutrition, Eudoxia Research, University, 256 Chapman Road STE 105-4, New Castle, USA*
[3]*ICSSR at College of Community Science, Central Agricultural University (Imphal), Tura, Meghalaya – 794005, India*

Corresponding author: **Jelang Jelku D. Sangma** | E-mail: **jelang.jelku3@gmail.com**

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Abstract

Livestock production is an essential component of global food systems, rural livelihoods, nutrition, and agricultural economies, but its expansion and intensification can generate substantial environmental and public health challenges. Sustainable livestock production requires an integrated approach that simultaneously addresses animal productivity, biodiversity conservation, natural-resource management, climate change, food safety, antimicrobial resistance, zoonotic diseases, and human well-being. Biodiversity conservation has an important role in maintaining genetic resources, ecological resilience, pasture productivity, soil health, and ecosystem services. Indigenous and locally adapted livestock breeds can contribute to resilient production systems because of their adaptation to local climatic conditions, diseases, feed resources, and management practices. Environmental management approaches, including rotational grazing, improved pasture management, silvopastoral systems, manure management, nutrient recycling, water conservation, and reduction of greenhouse-gas emissions, can improve resource-use efficiency while reducing ecological impacts. Sustainable livestock production is also closely connected with public health through the One Health framework, which recognizes the interdependence of human, animal, and environmental health. Improved biosecurity, vaccination, responsible antimicrobial use, disease surveillance, hygienic slaughter and processing, and safe food handling can reduce zoonotic disease risks and antimicrobial resistance. Emerging technologies, including precision livestock farming, remote sensing, artificial intelligence, genomic selection, microbial feed additives, and renewable-energy systems, provide additional opportunities to improve productivity and environmental performance. However, sustainability must be evaluated according to local ecological, socioeconomic, and production conditions rather than through a single universal model.

Keywords: *sustainable livestock production, biodiversity conservation, environmental management, zoonotic diseases, antimicrobial resistance.*

1. Introduction

Livestock production occupies an important position within global agricultural systems. Cattle, buffalo, sheep, goats, pigs, poultry, camels, and other domesticated animals contribute to food and nutrition security by providing meat, milk, eggs, and other animal-derived products. Livestock also provide income, employment, manure, draft power, and financial assets for millions of farming households. In mixed crop–livestock systems, animals contribute to nutrient cycling by converting agricultural by-products and vegetation that cannot be directly consumed by humans into valuable food and other products. Livestock production therefore has multidimensional economic, nutritional, social, and ecological significance [1].

At the same time, livestock systems can create environmental pressures when stocking densities, feed requirements, land use, waste generation, and resource consumption exceed ecological limits. Major concerns include land degradation, overgrazing, greenhouse-gas emissions, nutrient losses, water pollution, biodiversity decline, deforestation, and competition for feed resources. Intensification can also increase animal-health risks when high-density production, inadequate biosecurity, poor waste management, and inappropriate antimicrobial use occur [2]. The sustainability of livestock production therefore cannot be assessed solely according to productivity.

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A productive system may remain unsustainable if it degrades soil, reduces biodiversity, generates excessive pollution, compromises animal welfare, or increases public health risks. Conversely, well-managed livestock systems can contribute positively to nutrient cycling, landscape management, biodiversity conservation, and rural livelihoods.

Biodiversity is particularly important in sustainable livestock systems. Livestock genetic diversity provides a reservoir of traits related to disease resistance, heat tolerance, feed efficiency, reproductive performance, and adaptation to harsh environments. Locally adapted breeds can be particularly valuable under climate change because they may survive and reproduce under conditions where highly specialized breeds are vulnerable to environmental stress [3]. Environmental management provides another essential component. Improved grazing systems, silvopastoral practices, manure recycling, feed optimization, water conservation, and restoration of degraded pasture can reduce environmental impacts while improving productivity. Such measures can contribute to healthier soils, improved vegetation cover, enhanced carbon storage, and more efficient nutrient cycling [4]. Public health is also inseparable from livestock sustainability. Animals can act as reservoirs or hosts for infectious diseases capable of affecting humans. Foodborne pathogens can enter the food chain through contaminated products, while inappropriate antimicrobial use contributes to antimicrobial resistance. Climate change and ecological disturbance may further alter disease distributions and transmission patterns. The One Health approach recognizes that human, animal, plant, and environmental health are interconnected and therefore require coordinated management.

2. Sustainable Livestock Production and Biodiversity Conservation

Biodiversity within livestock systems includes genetic diversity among breeds, species diversity, and the diversity of plants, microorganisms, insects, birds, and other organisms associated with grazing landscapes. Maintaining this biological diversity is important for ecological stability and the long-term adaptability of agricultural systems [5]. Livestock genetic diversity has particular significance because many local breeds possess characteristics developed through long-term adaptation to specific environmental conditions. These characteristics may include tolerance to heat and drought, ability to utilize low-quality feed, resistance or tolerance to endemic diseases, and adaptation to local management systems. Conservation of indigenous breeds therefore represents both a cultural and biological resource.

Genetic erosion occurs when a small number of highly productive breeds replace locally adapted breeds. Although specialized breeds can provide high productivity under favorable conditions, excessive dependence on a narrow genetic base may increase vulnerability to emerging diseases, climatic stress, and changes in production environments. Conservation strategies should therefore combine in situ conservation, in which animals are maintained within their traditional production environments, with ex situ conservation, including cryopreservation of semen, embryos, and other genetic materials [6]. Biodiversity conservation also extends beyond livestock breeds. Well-managed grazing landscapes can support grassland plants, pollinators, soil microorganisms, birds, and other wildlife. Moderate grazing may help maintain habitat heterogeneity, while excessive grazing can cause vegetation loss, soil compaction, erosion, and biodiversity decline. Sustainable stocking rates and rotational grazing can therefore contribute to maintaining ecological balance.

Table 1. Integrated strategies for sustainable livestock production, biodiversity conservation, environmental management, and public health

Sustainability component	Major strategies	Important applications	Expected benefits
Livestock biodiversity	Conservation of indigenous breeds, in situ and ex situ conservation, genomic characterization	Maintenance of locally adapted cattle, buffalo, sheep, goats, poultry, and other breeds	Genetic resilience, climate adaptation, disease tolerance, preservation of genetic resources
Sustainable grazing	Rotational grazing, controlled stocking rates, pasture restoration	Managed rangelands, grasslands, and silvopastoral systems	Reduced overgrazing, improved vegetation, soil conservation, enhanced biodiversity
Animal nutrition	Balanced diets, improved forage, feed additives, alternative feed resources	Precision feeding, agricultural by-products, microbial feed additives	Improved feed efficiency, reduced feed waste, lower production costs
Manure management	Composting, anaerobic digestion, nutrient recovery, precision application	Recycling livestock manure as fertilizer and producing biogas	Reduced pollution, renewable energy production, nutrient recycling
Water management	Efficient drinking systems, water monitoring, wastewater treatment	Automated water supply and recycling systems	Reduced water consumption and contamination
Climate management	Heat-tolerant breeds, shade, ventilation, climate-informed feeding and housing	Climate-resilient livestock production	Reduced heat stress, improved productivity and animal welfare
Disease prevention	Vaccination, biosecurity, surveillance, veterinary diagnostics	Prevention and early detection of infectious and zoonotic diseases	Reduced disease transmission, mortality, and economic losses
Antimicrobial stewardship	Responsible antimicrobial use, improved hygiene, vaccination, alternative health-promoting feed strategies	Veterinary treatment and disease prevention	Reduced antimicrobial resistance and improved public health
Food safety	Hygienic milking, slaughter, processing, storage, traceability	Meat, milk, and egg production chains	Reduced foodborne disease risks and improved consumer safety
Precision livestock farming	Sensors, cameras, IoT, artificial intelligence, automated monitoring	Health, behavior, feeding, reproduction, and welfare monitoring	Early disease detection, improved resource efficiency, better animal welfare
Agroforestry and silvopastoral systems	Integration of trees, forage, and livestock	Tree–pasture–livestock production systems	Biodiversity enhancement, shade, soil protection, carbon storage
One Health management	Integrated human, animal, and environmental surveillance	Zoonoses, antimicrobial resistance, food safety, environmental health	Improved disease preparedness and protection of public health

3. Indigenous and Locally Adapted Livestock Breeds

Indigenous livestock breeds are important components of sustainable production, particularly in regions characterized by climatic stress, limited feed availability, and low-input management systems. These animals are often adapted to local environmental conditions and may perform reliably under conditions where exotic breeds require greater inputs [7]. Locally adapted cattle, buffaloes, sheep, goats, camels, poultry, and other species can contribute to food security and livelihood resilience. Their adaptation may reduce dependence on intensive housing, specialized feed, cooling systems, and veterinary interventions.

The conservation of indigenous breeds also supports cultural heritage and traditional knowledge. Local communities often possess detailed knowledge regarding animal selection, grazing, breeding, feeding, and disease management. Integrating this knowledge with modern genetics and veterinary science can strengthen sustainable breeding programs [8]. Future breeding programs should increasingly consider resilience traits, rather than focusing exclusively on maximum production. Heat tolerance, disease resistance, reproductive stability, longevity, feed efficiency, and adaptation to variable feed resources may become increasingly important under climate change.

4. Sustainable Grazing and Pasture Management

Pasture-based livestock production can provide important ecological and economic benefits when grazing intensity remains within the regenerative capacity of the ecosystem. Sustainable grazing requires appropriate stocking rates, grazing periods, recovery intervals, water management, and vegetation monitoring. Rotational grazing involves moving animals among different grazing areas to provide vegetation with sufficient recovery time. Properly implemented rotational systems may improve pasture utilization and reduce localized overgrazing. However, grazing management must be adapted to local vegetation, rainfall, soil type, livestock species, and seasonal conditions [9]. Restoration of degraded rangelands can involve reseeding native grasses, controlling invasive plants, improving water distribution, preventing soil erosion, and managing livestock density. Healthy pastures can support soil organic matter accumulation, water infiltration, nutrient cycling, and habitat diversity [10]. Silvopastoral systems provide another promising approach by integrating trees, forage plants, and livestock within the same production landscape. Trees can provide shade and shelter for animals, contribute organic matter, improve microclimatic conditions, and potentially increase carbon storage. Such systems may be particularly valuable under increasing temperatures.

5. Environmental Impacts of Livestock Production

Livestock production can influence the environment through greenhouse-gas emissions, land use, water consumption, nutrient losses, and waste generation. The magnitude of these effects varies substantially according to animal species, production system, feed composition, management intensity, geographical region, and productivity [11]. Ruminants produce methane during enteric fermentation, while manure management can generate methane and nitrous oxide. Feed production may also contribute to emissions through fertilizer use, land conversion, transport, and processing. Therefore, environmental management must consider the entire production chain rather than focusing on a single source of emissions [12]. Livestock production can also affect water resources. Animals require drinking water, while feed production may require substantial irrigation. Manure and wastewater can contaminate surface and groundwater if poorly managed. Nutrient-rich runoff can contribute to eutrophication and ecological degradation [13]. Land-use effects are equally important. Expansion of grazing land or feed production into natural ecosystems can contribute to habitat loss and biodiversity decline. Sustainable systems should therefore prioritize improved productivity on existing agricultural land, restoration of degraded land, responsible grazing, and protection of high-value ecosystems.

6. Manure Management and Nutrient Recycling

Livestock manure contains nitrogen, phosphorus, potassium, organic matter, and micronutrients that can contribute to soil fertility. Poorly managed manure, however, can release greenhouse gases and contaminate water resources [14]. Integrated manure management involves collection, storage, treatment, and appropriate application to agricultural land. Composting can stabilize organic matter and reduce some environmental risks. Anaerobic digestion can convert manure into biogas and nutrient-rich digestate [15]. Nutrient recycling creates a connection between livestock and crop production. Crop residues can be used as animal feed, while manure can return nutrients to agricultural soils. This crop–livestock integration reduces dependence on external fertilizers and contributes to circular agricultural systems. Precision manure application can further improve nutrient efficiency by matching manure application rates with crop requirements. Such practices can reduce nitrogen and phosphorus losses while increasing the agronomic value of livestock waste.

7. Livestock Production and Climate Change

Climate change presents a two-way relationship with livestock production. Livestock contributes to greenhouse-gas emissions, while climate change affects livestock productivity, reproduction, disease patterns, feed availability, and animal welfare [16]. Heat stress is particularly important in cattle, buffaloes, sheep, goats, poultry, and pigs. High temperatures can reduce feed intake, growth, milk production, fertility, and immunity. Poultry may be especially vulnerable to heat stress because of their high metabolic rates and limited ability to dissipate body heat.

Adaptation strategies include shade provision, improved ventilation, access to clean drinking water, modified feeding schedules, heat-tolerant breeds, improved housing, and climate-informed management [17]. Breeding animals with greater heat tolerance and disease resilience can provide long-term adaptation benefits. Indigenous breeds may be particularly valuable genetic resources in this context.

8. Sustainable Livestock Nutrition

Feed efficiency is one of the most important determinants of livestock sustainability. Improving the amount of animal product obtained per unit of feed can reduce land, water, and energy requirements per unit of production. Feed optimization can involve balancing dietary nutrients, improving forage quality, incorporating locally available feed resources, and reducing feed losses. Enzymes, probiotics, prebiotics, microbial additives, and other feed technologies may improve nutrient digestibility and animal performance. Alternative feed ingredients, including agricultural by-products and selected food-processing residues, can reduce competition between animal feed and human food resources. However, their nutritional composition, safety, digestibility, contamination risks, and availability must be carefully evaluated [18]. In ruminants, dietary strategies designed to reduce enteric methane production are increasingly investigated. Such strategies include improved forage quality, selected feed additives, and optimization of dietary composition. Their effectiveness depends on animal type, feeding system, production conditions, and long-term practicality.

9. Livestock Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services

Well-managed livestock systems can contribute to ecosystem services. Grazing animals can maintain open landscapes, influence vegetation structure, recycle nutrients, disperse seeds, and support habitat heterogeneity. In some grassland ecosystems, appropriate grazing may help prevent shrub encroachment and maintain habitats for grassland species. Livestock manure contributes organic matter and nutrients to soils, while grazing can influence plant community composition [19]. However, these benefits depend on management intensity. Excessive stocking can reverse positive effects by causing vegetation degradation and soil erosion. Sustainable livestock management therefore requires balancing production objectives with ecosystem carrying capacity.

10. One Health and Sustainable Livestock Production

The One Health framework emphasizes the interconnectedness of human health, animal health, and environmental health. Livestock systems are central to this framework because animals can serve as reservoirs or hosts for infectious agents, while environmental conditions can influence pathogen survival and transmission.

Zoonotic diseases can emerge or spread through interactions among livestock, wildlife, humans, and their shared environments. Changes in land use, wildlife habitat, animal movement, climate, and livestock production intensity can influence disease risks [20]. A One Health approach requires coordination among veterinarians, physicians, epidemiologists, environmental scientists, agricultural specialists, microbiologists, policymakers, and local communities. Disease surveillance should integrate information from livestock populations, wildlife, humans, food systems, and environmental sources. Biosecurity is a key component. Measures such as controlled animal movement, quarantine, vaccination, sanitation, vector control, appropriate housing, and disease monitoring can reduce the introduction and spread of infectious diseases.

11. Antimicrobial Resistance and Livestock Systems

Antimicrobial resistance is an important public health and agricultural challenge. Antimicrobial agents are used in livestock for treatment of bacterial diseases and, in some settings, for disease prevention. Inappropriate or excessive use can contribute to the selection of resistant microorganisms. Responsible antimicrobial stewardship requires accurate diagnosis, appropriate drug selection, correct dosage and duration, veterinary oversight, and adherence to withdrawal periods. Preventive measures such as vaccination, improved hygiene, biosecurity, nutrition, and housing can reduce the need for antimicrobial treatment [7]. Surveillance of antimicrobial use and resistance patterns is essential. Integrated monitoring across human, animal, food, and environmental sectors can identify emerging resistance and support evidence-based interventions. The reduction of antimicrobial use should not compromise animal welfare. Sick animals require appropriate treatment, and antimicrobial stewardship should focus on responsible use rather than indiscriminate elimination of veterinary medicines.

12. Food Safety and Public Health

Livestock-derived foods can contribute substantially to human nutrition by supplying high-quality protein, essential amino acids, vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients. However, meat, milk, and eggs can also serve as vehicles for foodborne pathogens if production, processing, storage, or handling conditions are inadequate. Important food-safety measures include animal health monitoring, hygienic milking, safe slaughter, clean water, appropriate storage temperatures, contamination control, and effective inspection systems. The use of integrated surveillance systems can help identify contamination risks across the food chain. Traceability technologies may allow contaminated products to be identified and removed more rapidly, thereby reducing public health impacts [3]. Food safety should therefore be considered an integral component of sustainable livestock production rather than a separate issue.

13. Animal Welfare and Sustainable Production

Animal welfare is increasingly recognized as an important component of responsible livestock production. Good welfare involves appropriate nutrition, comfortable housing, freedom from avoidable pain and disease, opportunities for natural behaviors where feasible, and protection from excessive environmental stress [2]. Poor welfare can also reduce productivity through impaired growth, reproduction, immunity, and feed efficiency. Therefore, improving animal welfare may produce both ethical and economic benefits [5]. Environmental enrichment, appropriate stocking densities, adequate ventilation, clean water, balanced nutrition, disease prevention, and humane handling contribute to improved welfare. Sustainable livestock systems should integrate productivity with animal health and welfare rather than treating them as competing objectives.

14. Precision Livestock Farming

Digital technologies are increasingly being applied to livestock production through precision livestock farming. Sensors, cameras, wearable devices, automated feeding systems, and artificial intelligence can provide continuous information about animal behavior and physiological conditions. Computer vision can monitor movement, body condition, lameness, feeding behavior, and social interactions. Wearable sensors can measure activity, temperature, and other physiological indicators. AI can analyze these data and identify abnormal patterns that may indicate disease, heat stress, reproductive problems, or welfare concerns. Precision livestock farming can improve resource efficiency by allowing feed, water, and veterinary interventions to be targeted according to individual or group requirements. Early disease detection may also reduce mortality and unnecessary medication.

15. Biotechnology for Sustainable Livestock Production

Biotechnology can improve livestock sustainability through genetic selection, reproductive technologies, microbial feed additives, vaccines, diagnostic tools, and improved feed-processing methods. Genomic selection can accelerate the identification of animals with desirable traits such as feed efficiency, disease resistance, fertility, and heat tolerance. Molecular diagnostics can enable rapid identification of pathogens, improving disease-control decisions. Vaccines represent an important preventive technology because effective vaccination can reduce disease incidence and the need for antimicrobial treatment. Probiotics and microbial feed additives may support gastrointestinal health and nutrient utilization. Biotechnology should be integrated with conventional husbandry and ecological management rather than used as a substitute for good management practices.

16. Biodiversity Conservation through Integrated Crop–Livestock Systems

Integrated crop–livestock systems can increase resource-use efficiency by connecting crop and animal production. Crop residues can provide feed, while livestock manure returns nutrients to fields. Such systems can reduce dependence on external inputs and improve nutrient cycling. They may also increase farm resilience because farmers have multiple sources of food and income. Agroforestry and silvopastoral systems can further diversify agricultural landscapes. Trees, crops, forage, and livestock can be combined to create multifunctional production systems capable of providing food, income, shade, habitat, carbon storage, and other ecosystem services.

20. Conclusion

Sustainable livestock production requires a transition from narrowly focused productivity models toward integrated systems that recognize the relationships among animal production, biodiversity, environmental integrity, and human health. Conservation of livestock genetic diversity, sustainable grazing, improved nutrition, manure management, water conservation, agroforestry, and climate adaptation can enhance ecological resilience while maintaining agricultural productivity.

The One Health perspective further demonstrates that livestock sustainability cannot be separated from public health. Zoonotic diseases, foodborne pathogens, antimicrobial resistance, and environmental contamination require coordinated interventions involving veterinary, medical, agricultural, and environmental sectors. Improved biosecurity, vaccination, responsible antimicrobial use, food safety, and disease surveillance are therefore fundamental components of sustainable livestock systems. Emerging technologies such as precision livestock farming, artificial intelligence, genomic selection, biotechnology, and advanced environmental monitoring can improve efficiency and early risk detection. Nevertheless, technology must complement sound ecological management, animal welfare, farmer knowledge, and appropriate institutional support. Ultimately, sustainable livestock production should aim to produce nutritious food and support livelihoods while conserving biodiversity, maintaining healthy ecosystems, protecting animal welfare, and minimizing risks to human health. A locally adapted, circular, climate-resilient, and One Health-oriented approach offers the strongest pathway toward livestock systems capable of contributing to future food security without compromising environmental and public health.

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