

# MANAGING MOBILE VETERINARY CLINICS & VETERINARY CENTERS

## Veterinary services at a Glance:

- Veterinary service providers manage essential services to sheep, cattle and goat producers in NES.
- The vet business model is tied to climate and weather patterns. With good rainfall, animals are healthy and breeders invest in herds. In bad years, herd owners do not invest in less healthy animals.
- Veterinary clinics have challenges to maintain cold chain for medicines, exchange rate fluctuations, power outages, managing client trust and stress.
- Meeting seasonal needs requires careful management of inventory.
- Informal supplier credit mechanisms expand services but have risks.
- Vet needs include better refrigeration, expand credit options, business management tools, technical support and weather forecasting.



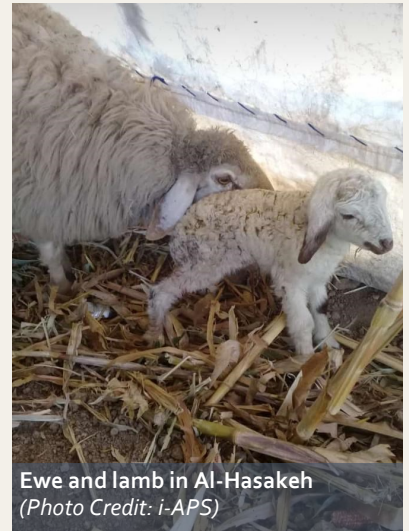
Sheep vaccination  
(Photo Credit: i-APS)



## VETERINARY CLINIC FUNCTIONS AND IMPORTANCE

Local veterinary centers and mobile veterinary clinics provide essential veterinary services, medicines and feed additives. There are multiple veterinary service providers that livestock breeders can work with. Mobile veterinary clinics travel to livestock markets to provide animal/herd assessments, provide feed concentrates, medicines and additives.

Veterinary center and mobile clinics operate in a business environment that is driven by weather patterns and seasonal changes that impact the quality of natural pastures and livestock prices. During seasons with good rainfall, natural pastures support the growth of healthy flocks that are productive. Livestock breeders have more resources to purchase feed concentrates, vitamins and minerals that aid in both meat and milk production. When herds are productive, fewer herd owners sell animals and market prices rise. During these seasons, veterinary centers and mobile clinics enjoy good business because herd owners invest in their animals. Conversely, during drought years, animal health is poor and the coping strategy for many households is to sell some of their herd. Market prices decline with higher volume and poorer quality animals for sale. During these conditions, herd owner income is reduced and prices for hay and fodder are higher. The net result is fewer herd owners invest in feed concentrates, medicines and feed additives. Fortunately, key informant interviews report that the last three years have been favorable for their business.



Ewe and lamb in Al-Hasakeh  
(Photo Credit: i-APS)

## CHALLENGES TO MOBILE CLINIC MANAGEMENT IN NORTHEAST SYRIA

Veterinary centers and mobile veterinary clinics have substantial challenges to managing their business efficiently. Some of the challenges identified by key informants include:

- **Supply chain and quality of vaccines and medicines:** Nearly all vaccines, medicines and additives are imported through channels that are not well controlled and cannot guarantee that an adequate cold chain has been maintained. This can render temperature sensitive vaccines and medicines ineffective.
- **Frequent power outages:** Mobile clinic and veterinary centers have refrigerators at their home base, but power outages make it difficult to maintain proper storage environments.
- **Foreign exchange rates fluctuate:** Veterinary clinics purchase medicines and supplies in U.S. dollars and all sales are in Syrian pounds. Because exchange rates fluctuate, the exchange risk is mostly borne by the herd owners buying the product. Rising costs cause herd owners to base treatment and vaccination decisions on price rather than need.
- **Competition and veterinary clinic quality:** Key informants report there are multiple veterinary suppliers in the market. There is competition for customers with most herd owners relying on their experience or word of mouth reviews of services.





## MARKETING SERVICES

Veterinary service centers and mobile clinics have dual challenges for marketing services. For larger and more knowledgeable herdowners, the use of feed concentrates, additives and medicines are well-known and used even when prices are high. Marketing services to less knowledgeable herdowners are more challenging because they are more price sensitive and may not seek out veterinary services early. Mobile clinics have the ability to assess animals in the market and provide services at home sites.

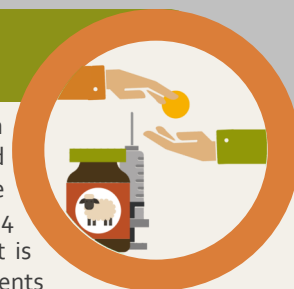
The primary way that veterinarians market services is through market presence and building a reputation for high quality services. In addition to vaccination and medicines, mobile vets and veterinary clinics provide herd assessments, treat parasites, diagnose diseases, artificial insemination, minor surgeries or treat wounds. Key informants indicate there are multiple veterinary service providers, but service quality varies because some veterinarians have not advanced their skills during 10 years of war and isolation.

There is a strong seasonality for veterinarians and veterinary suppliers. When livestock are moved from natural pastures to household feeding, there is a much stronger need for food additives and concentrates to maintain animal health and production. Feed requirements change through the year, especially during the last month of ewe pregnancy when lambs develop 70 percent of their body weight, and during lactation. During winter months, pneumonia and infectious diseases are more widespread. Veterinarians must manage the supply, cold chain and ensure their products are within their useful date.

Mobile veterinarians also cite marketing challenges for their businesses. They are traveling many days of the week and have to maintain a cold chain for medicines, often with a simple cooler. They travel out from markets to farm households to treat animals on-farm and return home to maintain stocks and supplies and manage their business. They also remain on call for emergency support to farm households by phone. These conditions promote a few challenges to veterinary practitioners and suppliers:

- Stress from constant travel, animal treatment and maintaining quality inventory, even protecting it from dust and dirt as they move from markets to clients.
- Support veterinarian access to adequate storage and back-up systems for refrigeration in their stores and higher quality coolers to use when traveling to ensure products remain cold.
- Maintain business and inventory supplies through management software and building their capacity to use data and video to support service delivery.

## SUPPLIER CREDITS



One way that veterinary service providers support clients is through informal supplier credits. To retain customers and expand business operations, clinics will provide herdowners with short term in-kind credits to enable the timely provision of supplies and medicines. Key informants say the terms for these loans range from \$100 per client to a limit of 900,000 SYP. Loan duration ranges from a few days to 4 months, usually to known clients in good standing or to people with a good reputation. No interest is charged and wholesalers also provide supplies to clinics up front. The system works well as long as payments remain timely.

Collection of payments are a challenge for the veterinary clinics. One mobile vet indicated that about 25 percent of repayments were late while others indicated limited problems. Typically herdowners will sell animals to repay debts and repayments can be challenging if market prices are poor in a given year.

## Veterinary Services Needs Assessment

Veterinary clinics provide services to local markets and herdowners with significant challenges. Based upon key informant interviews and a review of veterinary services, there are methods that may improve veterinary service provision:

- Better infrastructure for refrigeration, including solar electricity, back-up generators and high quality coolers to keep medicines reliably cold during daily travel
- Inventory management systems that track supplies, sales, expiration dates and client demand. Use weather forecasting to predict demand based upon pasture quality each year.
- Business management and marketing training including data-driven management tools
- Technical training to upgrade veterinary services and skills, for example surgical techniques and artificial insemination
- Access to laboratory testing facilities to test for livestock diseases
- Expand supplier credit mechanisms that support increased use of veterinary products and services