



GRAIN

April 2006

The top-down global response to bird flu

"We live in poverty, without any basic facilities and no one coming to enquire about our problems. All of a sudden all the television crew, media persons and doctors wearing surgical masks are roaming our dirt roads to collect more statistics. Our chickens were our only source of income and now they have destroyed even that. Is this what is called governance?"

-- Ganesh Sonar, small farmer, Navapur, Maharashtra, India¹

On 17 February 2006, the Egyptian government confirmed that bird flu had broken out in the nation's poultry. With the international spotlight beaming upon it, the government did not want to look unprepared or, worse, at fault. So it immediately responded by blaming migratory birds and traditional poultry practices. "The world is moving towards big farms because they can be controlled under veterinarian supervision... The time has come to get rid of the idea of breeding chickens on the roofs of houses," said Egypt's Prime Minister Ahmed Nazif.²

Then the Egyptian government swung into action with a military-style cleansing operation. It ordered the culling of all backyard and rooftop poultry and banned live bird markets, where 80% of the nation's poultry is sold. Farmers were promised compensation and vendors were promised refrigerators, so they could switch to selling frozen chicken, but neither materialised.³ Meanwhile, the government banned the transport of live poultry and ordered that all slaughtering must take place in official slaughterhouses, leaving farmers not located near the few official slaughterhouses with no way to slaughter their chickens.⁴

In less than a month, the Egyptian government effectively destroyed its multi-billion dollar poultry industry, the livelihoods of millions of Egyptians and its ancient poultry practices and biodiversity. The government is now easing restrictions on imports of frozen meat to make up for domestic shortfalls and importing chicks from the US and Europe to restock its commercial farms.⁵

The response from the Egyptian government was not only insensitive to the importance of poultry

for its people, it was misinformed. Yes, some backyard and rooftop flocks have been infected, but far more birds are dying from bird flu in factory farms. Plus, extensive testing of live migratory birds since 2004 did not report cases of bird flu.⁶ Although official veterinarian reports single out backyard flocks, the website of the Egyptian government clearly lists initial outbreaks at three factory farms where nearly 70,000 birds were culled, followed by further outbreaks on large factory farms in the regions of Ashmoun, Al-Marg, Giza Badrashaan and Damietta, as well as the culling of 77,000 birds at two farms near the desert city of Belbeis and 30,000 birds in nearby New Salhia where one of Egypt's largest poultry companies has its farms.⁷ The industry estimates that 50% of the commercial farms in the country have been infected and that over 25 million chickens have been slaughtered.⁸

Power politics at play

The response from the Egyptian government is sadly typical of what is happening around the world. Today's power politics ensure that the consequences for the poor get completely overshadowed by theoretical concerns over a possible human pandemic.

In India, for example, the government was badly prepared when bird flu broke out in the state of Maharashtra in March 2006. As in Egypt, the explosion of media interest propelled the government into action. Although the source of the outbreak was known to be from the area's major hatchery and although common sense would dictate that the proper response would be to follow the channels of transmission leading from there, the government imposed an indiscriminate cull in a 10 km radius around the infected sites following World Health Organisation (WHO) guidelines.⁹ Similar culls were repeated in one of the poorest districts of the state when a small number of samples collected from various villages came back positive. Within that district, complete culls occurred over an area of 1,500 square km, involving more than 300,000 birds and over 300 villages.¹⁰ The state did provide some compensation to the affected farmers, but the US\$0.88 given per bird was far below the value of a village chicken, which typically sells for three times the price of a factory chicken and produces eggs worth four times the price of industrial eggs.¹¹ Needless to say, the government has no plans for replenishing the invaluable poultry biodiversity that it destroyed and there is even talk of new state regulations to ban backyard poultry.¹²

Such consequences for the poor are not what the governments or the international agencies commanding the global strategy to control bird flu are preoccupied with. By contrast, WHO, which has shown scant regard for the impacts of its recommended control measures on small farmers, has been remarkably sensitive to the interests of pharmaceutical corporations and the ambitions of collaborating scientists. The password for its database of bird flu sequence data, the most important in the world, is available to only 15 laboratories worldwide.¹³ This sequence data is extremely valuable in the global race for bird flu vaccines and diagnostics – a market that could prove colossal if a human pandemic breaks out. Some scientists and governments are now publicly challenging the WHO to make the data public in the interests of global health, but the WHO is dragging its feet, insisting that this would discourage countries and some of its collaborating labs from submitting data, presumably because they want to retain rights over the information.¹⁴

The WHO doesn't name which collaborating labs are resisting the publication of bird flu sequence data, but it's clear to all observers that the US is a major obstacle. The US Centre for Disease Control (CDC), one of four WHO "Collaborating Centres" on influenza and the nerve centre of the US government's global influenza surveillance programme, refuses to make most of its sequence data public. US health industry consultant David Webster speculates that the CDC is concerned that sharing data would jeopardise its vaccine R&D partnerships with private companies.¹⁵

The US-held sequence data comes, of course, from bird flu samples collected in other countries. During outbreaks of bird flu, samples of the virus are either sent to the WHO's collaborating labs for testing or directly collected by various US surveillance programmes, such as that handled by the Department of Defense's global network of Naval Medical Research Units (NAMRU).¹⁶ The NAMRU in Cairo, which is the WHO's Collaborating Centre for Emerging and Re-emerging Infectious Disease in the Middle East and Mediterranean region, has done extensive sequence collection in bird flu-affected countries such as Azerbaijan, Iraq and Egypt.¹⁷ There's also a NAMRU in Indonesia, which simultaneously serves as the WHO Collaborating Centre for Infectious Diseases in Southeast Asia.¹⁸ But after 30 years of cooperation, the Indonesia government told NAMRU to pack up by the end of 2005, when its contract was expiring. An official with the Foreign Ministry admitted that the Indonesian government's change in position was linked to the potential development of a bird flu vaccine that could be worth "billions" and that it would only consider renewing NAMRU's contract if Indonesia were afforded the appropriate intellectual property protection over the samples collected within its territory.¹⁹

However the story in Indonesia plays out, the general picture is that just a few major labs in the industrialised countries are amassing control over vital genomic information through their privileged position in the international bird flu effort, with the WHO facilitating this process. Most developing countries diligently follow the WHO protocol and submit their data to its collaborating labs, which are concentrated in a handful of countries, or welcome its international surveillance teams within their borders.²⁰ The WHO has no authority over its collaborating laboratories and unless there are clear agreements of the kind Indonesia is demanding, there's nothing preventing these labs from cutting exclusive deals with pharmaceutical corporations, which could generate serious drug access problems for developing countries if a human-to-human transmissible strain of the bird flu virus emerges.²¹ It is not reassuring that the man in charge of the NAMRU network is US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, a long-standing pharmaceutical industry insider.²²

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), for its part, has responded to the bird flu crisis with a complete U-turn in its poultry production policies. After years of promoting small-scale poultry farming, the FAO now wants to put it out of business. Its technical advisor on bird flu to Viet Nam recently told Agence France-Presse that it made both public health and business sense for the country to shift from family poultry farms to large-scale factory farms.²³ Such thinking goes right to the very top of the organisation. Samuel Jutzi, the FAO's Director of Animal Production and Health, told a Swiss newspaper that small farms are behind the spread of bird flu, not the large factory farms that he describes as "highly protected". When asked if this meant the end of small-scale poultry farming, Jutzi said, "This type of production will become very marginal. High quality poultry, raised in the open air and grain-fed, will become a niche product."²⁴ The basic message from FAO, then, is that large-scale factory poultry farming, controlled by a small number of transnational corporations, is now the way to go.

This must come as a shock to the many small farmers around the world who have been lured into FAO's numerous "poultry revolution" programmes. In Afghanistan, for instance, the FAO, along with USAID and the Bangladeshi NGO BRAC, launched a programme in 1999 to build up a domestic poultry industry. Under the programme, 16,000 family farms, most of them run by women, shifted from native poultry breeds and local feed sources to an imported high-yielding variety and commercial feeds. Many of the women farmers even took out loans to build new chicken coops. The FAO also pushed the creation of mid-sized commercial poultry farms around the major cities by providing funding and technical training and introducing crossbred chickens from Pakistan. These larger commercial farms supply the chicks to the villages.²⁵

Thanks to the FAO, Afghanistan's small and backyard poultry producers are now integrated into the global poultry industry. Not surprisingly, in March of this year, they were integrated into the global bird flu crisis as well, when the H5N1 virus broke out in farms around two major cities. It's a twisted game the FAO has played: first convincing small farmers to abandon their traditional practices and biodiversity for modern practices, which increased their exposure to bird flu, and then telling the world that such farms need to be shut down to make way for the big factory farms of the future.

Command central

The financial picture tells a lot about the international bird flu response. Much of the funds for global bird flu efforts were centralised together this past January at a conference in Beijing where around 30 donors pledged US\$1.86 billion. More than 80% of those funds are earmarked for three international agencies running the global strategy: WHO, FAO and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). An additional US\$500 million is coordinated by the World Bank, through a loan facility that it announced just days before the Beijing fundraiser.²⁶ It is these agencies and their donors that set the international agenda and, by consequence, most national agendas for controlling bird flu.

Among the donors, the US is the world's biggest spender on bird flu, even though the H5N1 strain has yet to reach the country. It pledged US\$334 million at the Beijing event, the largest single country contribution, and soon after the US Congress approved an additional US\$280 million in emergency funds for fiscal year 2006, with US\$130 million of it going to USAID for international activities.²⁷ Washington money is flowing everywhere and giving a boost to its corporations in the process, particularly those of the health sector.²⁸ Funds for surveillance, for instance, a top priority for the US government, will benefit the Applera Corporation, which is about to launch a global partnership with the WHO, the CDC and the OIE for the distribution of the company's sequence protocols and bird flu detection kits.²⁹

This power structure at the top translates downwards through the national emergency responses, surveillance operations and preparedness plans that developing countries have been drawing up in meetings with officials and experts from the lead international agencies and Western governments. Funds are only offered on condition that the governments follow the guidelines laid out by WHO and FAO, which include controversial measures like culling, drug stockpiling and long-term restructuring of the poultry industry.³⁰ In certain cases, these foreign experts participate directly in the national decision-making process, as in Tanzania where USAID sits on the two government committees responsible for developing and executing the country's bird flu emergency preparedness plan.³¹

The preparedness plans are cold comfort to small poultry farmers. In Benin, for instance, the government has already told farmers that all birds will be culled in a radius of three to five km from any farm that is infected by bird flu. Patrice Sagbo, a local veterinarian, says that government officials are promising a little less than US\$4 per bird in compensation but nobody believes them. Farmers were promised compensation for their pigs during a swine flu outbreak in 2000, but the money never arrived. Sagbo says that this time farmers get the impression that the government's main interest is in garnering money from international donors. So far, the government has done nothing to help farmers suffering from the collapse of local markets, as consumers turn away from chicken. And if bird flu does strike, the government's compensation scheme would cover no more than 10% of the national flock.³²

Crush and control

The pretext of a looming human pandemic from avian influenza is generating a massive and centralised "crush and control" response. The question is: who will benefit? The more bird flu spreads, the more it becomes apparent that the institutions at the forefront of the global response to the virus have lost sense of rural realities. Their top-down strategies may sit well with governments, many of them neglectful if not hostile towards small farmers and the biodiversity they sustain, but they are a disaster for the poor that these institutions claim to serve.

The bird flu crisis and the global response are not just producing tragedies. Some are profiting. The destruction of native flocks and the restructuring of the poultry sector towards compartments of large-scale "biosecure" factory farms and supermarkets will benefit the transnational poultry companies and retailers. Some pharmaceutical corporations are already making a bonanza on anti-virals and detection kits, and there's a big potential pot of gold in vaccines should a human-to-human transmissible strain of bird flu emerge. Already we are seeing countries and laboratories jostling for position to pounce on this lucrative market.

The problems with the global response to bird flu begin with its top-down, centralised approach. Those affected are rarely given useful information about the disease and the corresponding control measures and they are almost never involved in decision-making. Overall, there's hardly been any effort to understand the dynamics of the disease in local contexts or to work with local communities in defining strategies. So what inevitably emerge are big solutions and "global strategies" for wiping out the disease. But these solutions and strategies wipe out the foundations for long term, pro-poor solutions in the process. It's like using a giant club to swat a fly. There's no nuance, no sensitivity to people's needs and, worst of all, no appreciation of the capacity and knowledge that farmers have for managing this virus. It's an old story being repeated, but this time under the guise of saving the world from a health crisis. The irony is that the solution proposed – a total shift to factory farming – takes us straight back to the source of the problem.³³

Against the grain is a series of short opinion pieces on recent trends and developments in the issues that GRAIN works on. Each one focuses on a specific and timely topic. All GRAIN's publications are available on the website at www.grain.org/publications/.

References

- 1 Joseph Keve, "Bird flu in India," *Die Wochen Zeitung*, Zurich, 26 February 2006.
- 2 "Egypt advises people to get rid of dead poultry," Reuters, 18 February 2006:
<http://www.alertnet.org/thenews/newsdesk/L18767812.htm>
- 3 Personal communication from Karam Saber, Land Centre for Human Rights, Cairo, 23 March 2006.
- 4 Azza Khattab, "A fowl business," *Egypt Today*, March 2006:
<http://www.egypttoday.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=6448>; Reem Leila, "Poultry industry collapses", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 23 February 2006: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/783/eg1.htm>; Reem Leila, "Here to stay?", *Al-Ahram Weekly*, 6 April 2006: <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2006/789/eg3.htm>
- 5 "Egypt poultry industry protests as bird flu bites," Reuters, 1 March 2006; Government of Egypt, "11,000 chicks from US to Egypt": <http://birdflu.sis.gov.eg/html/flu0102011.htm>
- 6 "DoD-GEIS: Influenza Surveillance at NAMRU-3":
www.apgea.army.mil/HIOupdate/HIOweeklyUpdate012105.pdf; Mike Ayyash, "Bye-Bye Birdie," *Business Today*, December 2005: <http://www.bnesstodayegypt.com/article.aspx?ArticleID=6216>
- 7 Government of Egypt, "Bird Flu Statistics": <http://birdflu.sis.gov.eg/html/flu01001.htm>
- 8 Personal communication from the El-Banna Company, 26 March 2005.
- 9 Nidhi Jamwal, TV Jayan, Ritu Gupta and Padmaparna Ghosh, "Who flew?" *Down to Earth* (14:20), CSE/Down To Earth Feature Service:
http://www.downtoearth.org.in/cover.asp?FolderName=20060315&FileName=news&sid=34&sec_id=9; Joseph Keve, *op cit*.
- 10 "Indian officials to slaughter more chickens after new bird flu cases," Agence France-Presse, 28 March 2006:
<http://www.todayonline.com/articles/109534.asp>
- 11 Personal communication with Joseph Keve, a poultry farmer and researcher from Maharashtra, 30 March 2006.
- 12 Nidhi Jamwal, T V Jayan, Ritu Gupta and Padmaparna Ghosh, "Who flew?" *Down to Earth* (14:20), CSE/Down To Earth Feature Service:
http://www.downtoearth.org.in/cover.asp?FolderName=20060315&FileName=news&sid=34&sec_id=9
- 13 According to Dick Thompson of the WHO, these 15 labs consist of the WHO Collaborating Centres and Reference Laboratories for influenza and bird flu, as well as other national laboratories that have submitted data and agreed to the terms of use.
- 14 "WHO expects agreement on system to open up controversial bird flu database," *Canadian Press*, 20 March 2006: <http://ca.news.yahoo.com/s/20032006/2/xhealth-expects-agreement-system-open-controversial-bird-flu-database.html>; Helen Branswell, "Labs shouldn't hoard flu data: Researcher," *Canadian Press*, 12 March 2006.
- 15 Rebecca Carr, "CDC locks up flu data: Critics call policy too restrictive," *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 3 October 2005.
- 16 The St. Jude's Research Hospital of Memphis, Tennessee, a WHO reference lab for bird flu, has been particularly active in collecting samples and identifying candidates for vaccine development under programs funded by the US government and directed by Dr. Robert Webster. See
[http://crisp.cit.nih.gov/crisp/CRISP_LIB.getdoc?textkey=6292644&p_grant_num=3N01AI095357-002&p_query=\(Influenza\)&ticket=10956082&p_audit_session_id=50230727&p_audit_score=100&p_audit_numfound=23&p_keywords=Influenza](http://crisp.cit.nih.gov/crisp/CRISP_LIB.getdoc?textkey=6292644&p_grant_num=3N01AI095357-002&p_query=(Influenza)&ticket=10956082&p_audit_session_id=50230727&p_audit_score=100&p_audit_numfound=23&p_keywords=Influenza) and <http://www.niaid.nih.gov/dmid/influenza/pandemic.htm>
- 17 MedAire, "Avian flu outbreaks: Archived country updates":
http://www.medaire.com/newsletter/avian_archived_updates.asp;
WHO-EMRO website: <http://www.emro.who.int/rpc/collaboratingcentres-emr.htm>
- 18 DoD-GEISWeb: <http://www.geis.fhp.osd.mil/GEIS/Training/namru-2asp.asp>
- 19 "Indonesia wants Navy lab's flu vaccine", Associated Press, 7 December 2005:
<http://www.navytimes.com/print.php?f=1-292925-1399098.php>; "Indonesia plays a dangerous game with avian flu", *Scientific American*, 5 December 2005:
<http://blog.sciam.com/index.php?title=indonesia+plays+a+dangerous+game+with+av&more=1&c=1&tb=1&pb=1> ;
"Indonesia may allow U.S. lab to remain," Associated Press, 7 December 2005.
- 20 Those countries with collaborating centres and reference labs for avian influenza are Australia, China (Hong Kong), France, Japan, UK, and the USA
- 21 Douglas Adams of the WHO collaborating laboratory in the UK says that novel viruses are now covered by a copyright, which is held by the "originating national laboratory" (FluWiki, "Blocking Sequence Data is Harmful to our Health": <http://www.fluwiki.com/pmwiki.php?n=Opinion.BlockingSequenceDataIsHarmfulToOurHealth>). What this means in reality is far from clear: Whose copyright law? How is the originating national laboratory defined? What does novel mean?
- 22 Rumsfeld spent almost a decade (1977-1985) as the Chief Executive Officer, President, and then Chairman of

GD Searle & Co, the American pharmaceutical company that brought the world the artificial sweetener Nutrasweet (aspartame). Searle was bought up by the agrichemical giant Monsanto Company in 1985, earning Rumsfeld a US\$12 million goodbye bonus. In 1997, Rumsfeld took over the Chairmanship of Gilead Sciences, the pharmaceutical company that developed and owns the patent to Tamiflu. Tamiflu supposedly relieves the symptoms of influenza and there is a global rush to produce it and buy it up, as WHO and Western governments promote it as the best defense against a human pandemic from bird flu. Gilead sole the exclusive license to produce and market Tamiflu to the Swiss drug giant Roche. Thanks to the singular promotion of this one drug, Rumsfeld is making millions now as one of the largest shareholders in Gilead. See <http://www.grain.org/briefings/?id=194>;
<http://www.defenselink.mil/bios/rumsfeld.html>; and, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G.D. Searle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/G.D._Searle)

23 "Does bird flu cloud have silver lining for Vietnam's poultry sector?", Agence France-Presse, 11 March 2006: http://news.yahoo.com/s/afp/20060312/wl_asia_afp/healthfluvietnampoultry

24 Anne Kauffman, "Le H5N1 favorisera les usines à poulets?" *La Presse*, 13 March 2006: http://www.lapresse.ch/vqhome/le_journal/economie/usine_poulet_130306.edition=nv.html

25 M.H. Nessar and O. Thieme (FAO Programme for Afghanistan), "Family poultry production in Afghanistan", <http://www.fao.org/ag/againfo/subjects/en/infpd/documents/papers/2004/7afghan1503.pdf>; FAO, "Afghanistan: a way out of poverty with milk and poultry production," June 2002: <http://www.fao.org/english/newsroom/news/2002/5480-en.html>; BRAC Afghanistan: <http://www.bracafg.org/agri1.php>

26 World Bank website: <http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/PROJECTS/0,,contentMDK:20835761~menuPK:2077305~pagePK:41367~piPK:51533~theSitePK:40941,00.html>

27 USAID website: http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/global_health/home/News/news_items/avian_influenza.html

28 See for example the list of grants for bird flu R&D provided to US corporations by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases: <http://www.niaid.nih.gov/dmid/influenza/pandemic.htm>

29 Presentation by Applied Biosystems (a subsidiary of Applera), December 2005: www.ead.ae/Tacsoft/FileManager/News/DubaiBiotech/Applied%20Biosystems%20AI%20Initiative%20Dec%202005.pdf . See also John Carey, "Prevent a pandemic, make a profit," *BusinessWeek Online*, November 28, 2005: http://www.businessweek.com/magazine/content/05_48/b3961078.htm

30 World Bank, "Avian and Human Influenza: Multidonor Financing Framework," January 12, 2006: <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/PROJECTS/Resources/40940-1136754783560/AHIFinancingFrameworkFINAL.pdf>

31 USAID, "USAID provides an additional \$700,000 to prevent bird flu outbreak": http://tanzania.usaid.gov/article.php?id=0065_EN

32 Personal communication with Patrice Sagbo, April 3, 2006.

33 GRAIN, "Fowl play: The poultry industry's central role in the bird flu crisis," February 2006: <http://www.grain.org/briefings/?id=194>