

A highly pathogenic variety of the H5N1 type of avian flu was first reported in the West African country of Benin in December 2007. Even though this type of flu has been known for more than four years, the authorities in Benin, rather than learning from others' experiences, have repeated many of their mistakes: they have dealt with the outbreaks secretly; they have blamed wild birds, with no supporting evidence; they have failed to ban the import of poultry. Worse still, they are refusing to pay compensation and thus causing huge economic problems for thousands of small farmers who have lost their livelihoods.

# Mismanaging avian flu in Benin



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**O**n 4 December 2007, Roger Dovonou, Benin's Minister for Agriculture, Livestock Farming and Fishing, went on television to announce the discovery of two suspected outbreaks of avian flu in the south of the country – one in the municipality of Adjara, about fifteen kilometres from Porto-Novo, and the other in the town of Akpakpa in Cotonou. Later that month, tests carried out by an Italian laboratory confirmed the authorities' suspicions. The disease was identified as a highly pathogenic strain of the avian flu virus type A (H5N1), first found in South Korea and since then identified in numerous outbreaks in several countries in Asia, Europe and Africa. H5N1 has caused several hundred human deaths worldwide.

Soon after the outbreaks were discovered in Benin, some 300 birds were slaughtered. The authorities

then took measures to restrict the movement of poultry between Porto-Novo and Cotonou but, somewhat perplexingly, not to other localities in Benin. As a result, avian flu spread to towns and villages in Ouémé department (where Porto-Novo is located). Without explaining what was going on, the authorities began to seize and destroy poultry. It was only after an angry crowd of several hundred poultry sellers from Cotonou and Ouémé started banging drums and expressing their discontent on local television channels that the Director of Livestock Farming, Dr Christophe Monsia, finally confirmed on 11 January 2008 that there had been four outbreaks of avian flu in Ouémé.

The action taken by the authorities was clearly inappropriate. It was unrealistic to expect the local population to collaborate with the authorities if they did not know what was going on. People were understandably angry. As one poultry seller

put it: “We have never had a disease called bird flu in our midst before. We know nothing about this disease and yet they come and point their weapons in our chests to threaten us and then take away our cages and hens, which we took out loans to buy.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the people sent to destroy poultry in the villages showed a puzzling lack of professionalism, moving from farm to farm with jute bags on their backs filled with possibly infected birds. In doing so, they could well have been spreading the virus, and therefore represented a danger to themselves and to all the communities they travelled through.

### Sources of contamination

As in other countries, it has been suggested that migratory birds play an important role in the transmission of avian flu. But no evidence has been produced to support this hypothesis. There has been no declared outbreak of avian flu in Europe since the end of August 2006, and no cases of avian flu have been detected in Senegal, which is the destination of millions of migratory birds from Europe. In reality, the cases of avian flu identified in Africa to date have been found on modern or relatively modern farms raising imported turkeys, broilers, laying hens, and so on. Moreover, these imported birds are kept in batteries throughout their lives and have no contact with local poultry populations. This has not prevented local poultry from being demonised as potential reservoirs of the virus and thousands of local birds being slaughtered, to the great despair of the villagers who farm them. It is clear that local birds are not, in fact, responsible for transmitting avian flu, but have nevertheless been blamed.

Indeed, local birds are a protection against disease, as was expressed well by Irene Hoffmann, chief of the animal production service at the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO): “Genetic diversity is an insurance against future threats such as famine, drought and epidemics. The existing animal gene pool may contain valuable but unknown resources that could be very useful for future food security and agricultural development. Maintaining animal genetic diversity allows farmers to select stocks or develop new breeds in response to environmental change, diseases and changing consumer demands”, she said.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, the Benin authorities have themselves appeared to suggest that imported poultry, rather than wild birds, were the cause of the outbreaks. In his television address on 11 January, Dr Christophe Monsia said: “Experience has shown that most countries that have suffered from avian flu across

Africa have done so as a result of commercial movements.... The pace of the disease is in line with the movement of poultry.” If this is the case, the government should have banned all poultry imports, even from countries that claimed not to be infected with avian flu. This is because, given the practice of re-exporting imported poultry from infected countries to non-infected countries by changing the outer packaging, the list of infected and non-infected countries can no longer be relied upon.

The story of the contamination of Nigeria by the H5N1 virus is illustrative. The virus broke out in 2003 in the Netherlands, from where a Nigerian bird farm was importing cargoes of eggs for hatching. Despite the honesty of the Dutch authorities, who informed their Nigerian partners of the outbreak, this farm continued to import eggs for hatching, completely infringing accepted industry practice. It should be noted that the farm belonged to Nigeria’s Minister of Sport at the time.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, in what appears to have been a deliberate attempt to muddy the waters, no records were kept. As a result, the disease spread to other industrial farms. As soon as the outbreak occurred, Benin, which adjoins Nigeria, should have taken strict measures to control its borders with its neighbour. Today, this Nigerian minister is sitting on his fortune, having contaminated Nigeria and Africa, whilst Africans continue to mourn their dead birds, and the local poultry industry across the continent faces economic ruin.

The Benin authorities, meanwhile, not only failed to ban, but actually promoted imported poultry, while carrying out a large-scale cull of local birds, despite all the precious resources these birds contain in terms of African genetic heritage. A public tasting of imported poultry and its by-products was organised amid great ceremony at the Palais des Congrès in Cotonou, in order to persuade the population to purchase and consume these products. The event was supported by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock Farming and Fishing and, indeed, by the whole government, and was widely covered by the media (with a report at least five minutes long on the national television channel). Makeshift cages and sheds, filled with imported laying birds, young cockerels and turkeys, have been set up throughout Benin while the cull of local birds continues. Yet nothing is known about whether or not these imported birds are infected with avian flu.

Throughout the process, the opinions of farmers and local poultry breeders were completely



1 In conversation with the author.

2 FAO, ‘Loss of domestic animal breeds alarming,’ Rome, 31 March 2004.

3 According to Chief Olatundé Badmus, National President of the Poultry Association of Nigeria (PAN), as reported in *The Punch*, Lagos, 15 February 2006. <http://www.punchng.com/>

4 Testimony gathered by the author during a protest staged by poultry farmers and poultry traders in Cotonou in January 2008.

disregarded. While many of these farmers may be illiterate, they are very far from stupid, as is clearly demonstrated by some of their comments:<sup>4</sup>

**Eugénie:** “I’ve heard that every country that suffers from avian flu is entitled to the sum of three billion CFA francs (US\$7 million) and that each of these countries has already received an advance of 800,000 francs (US\$1,900). This is the money they are currently using to destroy us, while modern farms with imported laying birds and meat birds are protected. They even organise grand tasting ceremonies for imported birds to encourage people to consume them in massive numbers. But we know very well that it is these imported hens and chickens that are bringing avian flu into our country. As far as I’m concerned it’s a huge conspiracy not just against us, but also against local birds. It’s a policy based on double standards. We will never accept it.”

**Dansou:** “Three days ago, I was coming home and a group of armed men blocked my way because I had some local birds on me. They asked where I had come from with the birds and told me to give them to them. So I told them quite seriously and very firmly that one of them would die that day if they tried to take my hens from me because I am willing and able to defend myself. That was when they decided to let me go.”

**Atima:** “A team from SOGEMA (Society for the Management of Autonomous Markets), accompanied by police officers, invaded our poultry sales outlets at the international market in Dantokpa, to take our birds from us and kill them. These are grave times and we are being driven into a corner so that they can destroy us. What country are we living in? We must react as soon as possible.”

**Yaotcha:** “In Adjarra, where they said they found avian flu, there were barely 50 birds in a little farm of imported day-old chicks. We will go and meet these killers of local birds. The village chiefs have lined their pockets with this business, and so have the mayors. They’ve been given money to destroy our birds, our income-generating activity, our economy and our lives, while we had nothing to do with the arrival of avian flu in our country. We demand compensation.”

#### **Destruction without compensation**

Despite the demands of local farmers such as Yaotcha, the Benin authorities are paying no compensation for culled birds. As well as being

unjust, such an attitude is counter-productive, in that it discourages farmers from reporting outbreaks. Joseph Domenech, Chief Veterinary Officer with the FAO in Nigeria, said in 2006: “African farmers should be offered economic incentives to ensure that they report any suspected cases of avian flu immediately and to discourage them from rushing to get their birds on to the market. The country causing grave concern at the moment is Niger, which borders the region of Nigeria that is affected by avian flu, and where two million vulnerable people already suffer from hunger. The highly pathogenic avian flu virus represents a very grave threat for animal health in West Africa. If it were to be an epizootic disease [an epidemic outbreak of disease in an animal population that might extend to humans] that spreads beyond the borders of Nigeria, it would have catastrophic effects on the means of existence and food security of several million people.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, this question caught the attention of donors during an international conference on avian flu in Bamako in Mali. Donors from ten countries, the European Commission, the World Bank and the African Development Bank made a commitment to donate US\$500 million to combat avian flu and prepare for the possibility of a human pandemic in 2007. More than 100 countries and international organisations were represented at the conference. The three-day meeting offered experts an opportunity to exchange information about the disease, and the ministerial delegates the chance to define joint strategies in respect of funding programmes to combat it.

Mr Christopher Delgado, an expert from the World Bank leading the inter-agency commission, made the following comments at the meeting:

“Our greatest concern is with the poor owners of small poultry farms. The idea of a mass slaughter of small farmers’ poultry is obscene. Bird production has become an important source of protein in developing countries. This activity has been growing at a rate of 5.9 per cent per year, compared with grain production, which has grown by only 0.4 per cent. In the absence of well-developed compensation programmes, it is the small farmers who run the risk of being wiped out.

“The compensation programmes need to be implemented rapidly. Experience has shown that in the event of an epidemic of avian flu, the birds must be slaughtered within 72 hours; otherwise the fight against the spread of the

<sup>5</sup> Bulletin Veille Grippe Aviaire, no. 15.  
<http://sist-emer.net/>

<sup>6</sup> Bulletin Veille Grippe Aviaire, no. 57.  
<http://sist-emer.net/>



disease becomes more difficult and more costly. Farmers must be compensated immediately to prevent them opposing the destruction of their sole means of subsistence.”<sup>6</sup>

It is only to be regretted that these comments were not translated into local languages and distributed to the farmers. Furthermore, the international community, through the World Bank, has earmarked a further US\$400 million for the same cause in 2008.

**Structure of avian flu management**

The management of avian flu is, of course, a technical matter. But that is no reason for saying that only the Department of Livestock Farming should be involved in the handling of the outbreaks, particularly as flu is a zoonosis, that is, a disease of animals that is transmissible to humans, and for this reason also a public health issue. Managing it requires the creation of a crisis committee, made up of several ministries and other bodies and institutions with dynamic operational units, each given clearly defined tasks. This is what is needed to fight the disease in a concrete, effective and transparent way. Otherwise, Benin runs the risk of repeating the mistakes it made with swine fever: even though programmes worth millions of CFA francs were set up to combat it, swine fever continues to destroy the pig population. Above all, we need clear policies, for it takes a brave farmer to continue to work in an area where the rules of the game are confused.

What is urgently needed is a well-thought-out, structured communications plan to create a relationship of trust between the authorities and the grassroots population. It should involve the

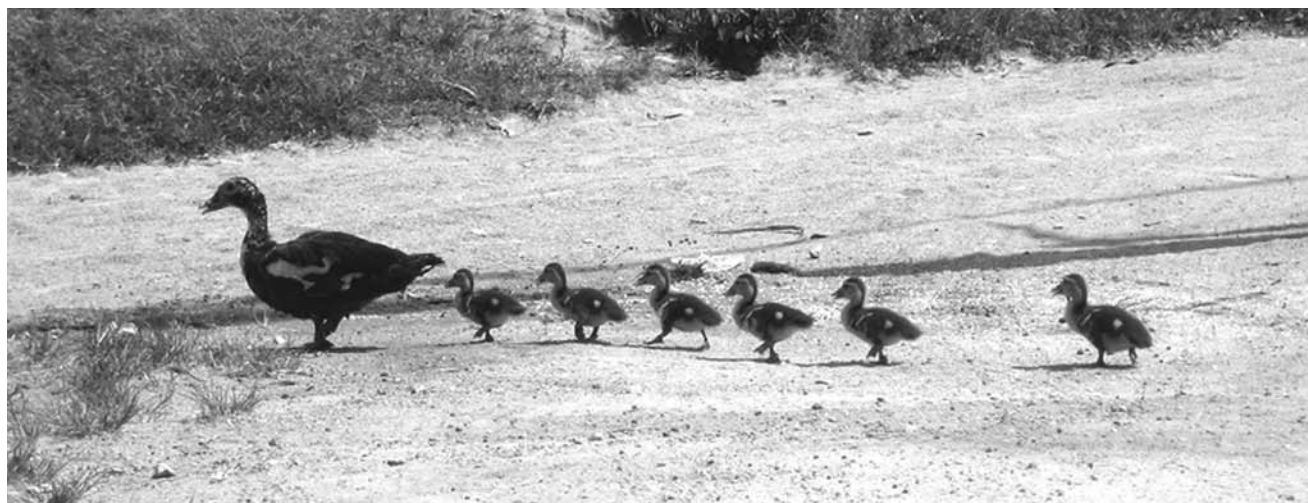
supply of transparent, continuous, non-exclusive information to provide reassurance that the public authorities will manage the situation in the interests of everyone involved, whatever their social class or employment. Poultry farmers should be encouraged to participate in an open decision-making process so that they will become more likely to support the various measures needed to manage the avian flu crisis effectively. Messages must as far as possible be translated into the target national languages and disseminated via the most appropriate channels.

As yet, local poultry sellers have not been given information on avian flu and do not even know what it is. As one commented: “They have killed all our birds and driven us into economic ruin. We have not been given any information whatsoever. They seize our birds with guns everywhere to intimidate us. What do these people want to do to us?”<sup>7</sup> It is clear that one day all this discontent could explode.

**Conclusion**

The way avian flu is being managed in Benin is a cause of great concern and raises questions about the competence of the authorities in charge. Veterinary medicine is, after all, a science. As this is the case, it should be possible to justify any action taken by the authorities on technical and scientific grounds. Yet we cannot continue to behave like laymen, blindly exterminating animals, without first carrying out a serious screening process to identify whether or not they are infected. We urgently need to trace the origin of all poultry on contaminated farms in order to track accurately the progress of the disease. We must put an end to our old practice of trying to improvise our way out of a crisis.

<sup>7</sup> Personal conversation with the author.



*In Benin, as elsewhere, Avian flu is being blamed on wild or backyard birds*