

Update on swine flu

An interesting aspect of the swine flu outbreak is how early the link was made with factory farming. This was largely the result of pressure from local residents in the village of La Gloria in the municipality of Perote, Mexico. Like other communities, in Romania (Europe) and North Carolina (USA), they have been struggling for years against the social, environmental and health impacts of the large pig farms that Smithfield, the world's largest pork producer, has set up through a joint venture near their hamlets. Indeed, well before the outbreak, some leaders in La Gloria were arrested or beaten up because of their opposition.

When people were affected by a strange respiratory disease in 2008, they were convinced from the beginning that the outbreak was caused by waste coming from the farms. The community made repeated efforts to get the authorities to investigate. When the authorities finally sent a medical team to test people in the community, they found that 60 per cent of the community's 3,000 people were affected by an undiagnosed respiratory disease. It was not until weeks later, on 27 April 2009, when the country was well into a swine flu epidemic affecting thousands of people, that the Mexican government announced that the sole sample taken from La Gloria (that of a 5-year-old boy) and sent to a laboratory with the capacity to diagnose human swine flu, had come back positive for H1N1 – the first recorded case of swine flu in the country.

Only at this point did the authorities and media turn their attention to this community. When journalists turned up in La Gloria, the villagers, refusing to be intimidated by the company or the government, pointed directly to the factory farms, particularly to the tanks of effluent beside the hog barns, as the cause of the outbreak. For once the mythical nature of modern "biosecurity", promoted by the meat industry's propaganda, was exposed for the whole world to see. The community's direct experience of the health and environmental impact of living next to a factory farm, together with a growing body of research and analysis showing that factory farms create the ideal breeding grounds for the emergence of new variants of influenza in humans, made it abundantly clear where the blame lay for this epidemic. Smithfield has, of course, denied any link.

Communities like La Gloria are on the front line of resistance to pandemics, but they are totally excluded from official responses or strategies. Indeed, it was owing to luck that the one sample taken from the community was properly tested. How many other villagers were affected, we will never know. We are also unlikely to have conclusive evidence that the disease emerged from the Smithfield operation, because the company is in charge of the investigation. But even if we never have this "smoking gun", the people of La Gloria know, and many more people now understand, the grave risk to the world's health (not to mention the economy) that these factory farms represent, because of the way they breed dangerous pathogens.

Not a single factory farm in Mexico was closed down, or even thoroughly or independently investigated. The authorities in far away Egypt, by contrast, took advantage of the swine flu epidemic to order the wholesale slaughter of the 300,000 pigs reared by small producers. They took this drastic measure even though swine flu is widely known to be transmitted by humans not pigs, and no case of the disease had been reported in the country. In Egypt, a predominantly Muslim country, the raising and consumption of pigs is largely restricted to the country's Christian minority, about 10 per cent of the population. The largest group of pig farmers are the largely Christian rubbish collectors, who live in the slums of Manishyet Nasr on the outskirts of Cairo. Isaac Mikhail, the head of their association there, said that they reared about 65,000 pigs in the slum, and that this activity provided the principal income for about 55,000 people. When the slaughter began, angry pig farmers blocked the roads and hurled rocks and bottles at the police, who responded by charging armoured cars into the protesters.

In response to international criticism, including from the OIE and the FAO, the Egyptian government said that it was a hygiene measure to rid the country of "unsanitary pig farming conditions" and to make way for "cleaner" European-style factory farms. Ministry of Agriculture officials have said that pig rearing will restart in two years, using imported animals in specially constructed farms in the countryside.

When the bird flu first broke out in Asia in 2003, the poultry corporations denied

that their farms were the cause. Back then, it was difficult to highlight the role of factory farms, as the companies, with the active complicity of the authorities and the media, were able to turn people's attention to wild birds and traditional poultry practices. But this is changing, despite what occurred in Egypt. The link between factory farming and the growing threat of pandemic diseases in humans is undeniable, and even if governments and international agencies continue to toe the corporate line, local struggles against factory farms have assumed their rightful place at the centre of the global response to emerging diseases. One indication of this shift is the key role played by La Gloria residents at a large meeting, held in Jalisco, Mexico, at the end of May, of the Asamblea de Afectados Ambientales (Assembly of the Environmentally Affected). Whereas once La Gloria residents felt isolated in a lonely struggle against a food giant, now they are at the centre of a growing movement to fight all projects that affect local populations with pollution, poisons, illness, GMO contamination, and so on. Indeed, the Assembly's next meeting at the end of 2009 will be held in La Gloria.

GRAIN publications on swine flu and related issues:

Against the grain, "A food system that kills", April 2009.
<http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=48>

Edward Hammond, "Indonesia fights to change WTO rules on flu vaccines", *Seedling*, April 2009.
<http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=593>

Patrice Sagbo, "Mismanaging avian flu in Benin", *Seedling*, July 2008.
<http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=554>

Against the grain, "Bird flu in eastern India: another senseless slaughter", February 2008.
<http://www.grain.org/nfg/?id=554>

Against the grain, "Bird flu – a bonanza for 'Big Chicken'", March 2007.
<http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=22>

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

