

BACKGROUND OVERVIEW

AFRICAN FARMERS MISSING OUT ON THE GLOBAL 'LIVESTOCK REVOLUTION'

Veterinary Science, Transboundary Animal Diseases and Markets

By Professor Ian Scoones, Institute of Development Studies, UK

Contexts

Contexts for southern Africa's livestock production systems are fast changing. A wider group of producers, including smallholders, are demanding access to markets and the privileged position of large scale ranching is being questioned.

Subsidies have been slashed and development efforts have concentrated increasingly on broader-based growth objectives. At the same time, preferential trade agreements – notably the ACP quota system for trade with the European Union – have ended, giving way to Economic Partnership Agreements, with uncertain consequences for the beef industry, and global supply and competition continues to increase.

Not all bad news

But all is not doom and gloom. New markets are opening up – in the region, as urban growth accelerates and demand for red meat increases, as well as in Asia and the Middle East.

Uncertainties about the future abound. These are added to by the changing patterns of transboundary animal diseases. With foot and mouth disease endemic among buffalo populations across the region, there is always the risk of a new outbreak.

These populations are due to increase significantly in number and distribution with the establishment of transfrontier conservation areas (TFCAs) aimed at creating a vast network of conservation areas established to promote biodiversity and ecotourism, encapsulated by the vision of an 'Africa without fences'.

This complicates disease management systems involving area-based zonation, movement control, fencing, permits and animal traceability which in any case are both difficult and expensive to implement. As import standards ratchet ever upwards, questions are raised about the feasibility of compliance, given other demands on already stretched veterinary systems and the apparently conflicting demands of livestock development and conservation within the over-arching context of rural development and poverty alleviation.

Historical and current responses

How should producers, governments and international organisations respond to these changing dynamic contexts? Disease management and control responses of course have to be understood in relation to their political-economic contexts. Many trans-boundary animal diseases are 'trade' diseases, ones that only become significant when attempts to export animals or meat are attempted. Veterinary responses are respond to market conditions, and policies for disease control – and associated scientific/technological efforts – reflect this.

Taking an historical perspective, veterinary scientific and policy responses have very often been in support of patterns of production dominated by large-scale (capitalist) commercial beef concerns, and since the colonial era the needs of such producers have been the major concern of scientists and policymakers, thus 'manufacturing' a disease response and (often draconian) control programme in line with such interests.

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Such approaches are now deeply embedded in policies, institutions and professional practices across Africa, and are reflected in expert advice networks and international development organisations and standard setting bodies (such as FAO, OIE etc.). Continued overleaf

In the current context, with significant funds being pumped into trans-boundary disease control efforts across Africa through a range of international initiatives, the 'manufactured' response to disease can be seen as constructed as a confluence of a range of different contemporary and historical influences, including inter alia: the neo-liberal economic agenda, and the drive to growth; the increasing internationalisation of trade; the global effects of northern consumer and producer concerns through design of international standards; the inertia of veterinary and livestock marketing policymaking bureaucracies in Africa; and the impact of international standard setting organisations, often influenced by powerful, northern commercial interests.

Exploring alternatives

Thus diseases, their 'threat' and their 'epidemic' qualities must be understood in relation to the influence of particular interactions of discourses, practices, actors, networks and interests. With a wider understanding of these interactions, the scientific and policy responses in Africa can be interrogated and unpacked, asking whose interests does the current scientific-policy consensus serve, and what alternative options are being excluded?

Exploring the alternatives has been the focus of project's work on scenarios, working with diverse stakeholders in east and southern Africa to explore in an open, engaged and hopefully reflexive manner alternative options for marketing and livestock-based livelihoods, and, with this, alternative understandings of disease and its dynamics; suggesting in turn different priorities for science and technology efforts (e.g. on vaccine technologies or epidemiological surveillance).

For more information on this project, visit: <http://www.steps-centre.org/ourresearch/vetscience.html>

Or contact: Julia Day / Tel: +44 (0)7974 209148 / Email: j.day@ids.ac.uk
www.steps-centre.org