

Communication Capacity of the Veterinary Services

in East Africa

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By : CATHERINE RIUNGU

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- ✘ "The media will never warm up to cows", a senior editor in Nairobi told me when I started collecting material for this seminar. He explained how he had received a story on a farmer selling his animals at throw away prices because they risked dying due to lack of feed given the drought prevailing in the country. I don't know where the story lies or who would be interested in reading. It probably belongs to the features or the provincial spaces on page 34...This is the mood of my paper.
- ✘ When I received the invitation to attend and make a presentation here, I asked myself whether I was the right media person to undertake the task.
- ✘ My first response was, yes, after all I am a journalist of many years and I have written on a wide range of topics be they business, ICT, agriculture, trade, a little bit of politics etc, etc, etc.
- ✘ Before making the commitment, I shopped around for a journalist who could do the job better than me. Hard to believe, but everyone I thought could do it (the few journalists who write on matters agriculture) said no, I don't have the competence, neither the background to make such a presentation.

- ✘ I tried remembering the last time I wrote on animal health and it was six years ago, when I edited a farming magazine which died as soon as I left to work for the mainstream media.
- ✘ The most memorable piece I did was a case study on the University of Nairobi's College of Veterinary Services Hospital for Animals, probably the only one of its kind in the region. Here, I discovered that animals too can be admitted in a hospital - How many here know this?
- ✘ I have not read about it again, neither have I followed it up.
- ✘ The reason I am giving this background is to demonstrate just how wanting media in East Africa is when it comes to agriculture journalism.
- ✘ And it isn't just in agriculture reporting, all other sectors lack specialization, meaning no reporter can authoritatively write on a subject. We have tried to push for training along these lines but so far nothing has come of our efforts, neither do media owners and managers seem interested. The leading media houses actually don't have science editors!
- ✘ I ran through Nation Media Group's - the largest media house in East and Central Africa - coverage of livestock related issues and my findings were shocking. Later in this presentation, I

- ✘ will run you through some of the pieces I picked as examples of how casually the subject is treated by the media.
- ✘ For your information, I am a seasoned writer, (and occasionally helps with editing) for the region's The EastAfrican, a paper that covers five countries within the East African Community bloc.
- ✘ I have deliberately decided to take Kenya's media as representative of the region because the country is the biggest economy and boasts the most vibrant and free media, and is the only one with cross-border media ownership with TV, Radio and newspapers in the three original EAC states and will soon open in Rwanda.
- ✘ When I inquired why coverage of livestock was so scant, I was informed that there is nothing really exciting (sex) to read about animals and our readership was not wide in the rural areas where animals are kept. When it is an editor telling you this, then you know, it is a lost battle.
- ✘ Next, I inquired about electronic media coverage of animal issues. In Kenya only one radio station runs a programme on animals which can be translated as the Farmer's Voice, broadcast in a local language.

- ✘ The programme has been rated as the most listened to in East Africa by a research firm - Synovote - meaning farmers are hungry for information. I am an ardent listener to the programme for two reasons- I am a farmer in my own small way and two I am an agriculture journalist and the programme gives ideas on stories to pursue. I have learnt valuable lessons on the how to...the sort of stories I have not seen in newspapers and as I got down to doing this paper I asked myself why no reporter has taken this approach.
- ✘ My next stop was at Kenya's Department of Livestock where all the information is stored. The officers I spoke to minced no words, telling me that the media in the country is the most unhelpful because, unless the media houses are paid they will not bother with this kind of information because, again, it does not sell.
- ✘ The few magazines on farming in the country have very low circulation and are not run professionally. Close to all of them rely on advertising revenue and exist, not to bridge the information gap, but as conduits for earning money through the little advertising they solicit.

- ✘ The Vet department has had to resort to other means of communication such as farmer field days, agricultural shows, chief's barazas or public days to communicate important issues to the people. Here officials distribute pamphlets, brochures, booklets and other materials to farmers.
- ✘ I can also say with some degree of accuracy that farming in Kenya has not been embraced as a business and it is only recently that this concept has begun to take root. Traditionally, those who engage in farming do it because of lack of something better to do therefore it has remained a preserve of school drop outs and the less educated.
- ✘ What has then happened is that those practicing farming will not read - either because they can't or have no interest in reading, leading to the low churning out of information. The farmers have also failed to benefit from modern techniques sticking with old practices and have therefore ended up being relegated to poverty as a result of low productivity.
- ✘ But this is not to say all of them are in this boat. There are a few who have taken farming seriously and will not miss an opportunity to learn how to improve their livestock. This gives hope that by highlighting and sharing the success stories, things might change for the better. But the question of where the stories will be told remains.

- ✘ Kenya has some of the best research institutions in the world but their findings are gathering dust in libraries due to lack of communication channels and the funds required to disseminate the information.
- ✘ The country has an Agricultural Information Centre but due to lack of funding, the centre's rich collection of very useful information can only be available from its outlets which few farmers know about.
- ✘ The livestock sector also lacks a platform through which industry issues can be strongly articulated. Other sectors have built strong profiles through powerful lobby groups which have successfully managed to put their interests in frequent limelight.
- ✘ Lack of ICT in the rural areas too has taken its toll on communication because with information technology, those with useful information can post it in the internet to be accessed by users but even with this, they would have to be trained in basic ICT skills. The cost is also very high.
- ✘ It is hoped that with the onset of ICT villages where all constituencies will have a centre, the communication gap will be go up a few steps.

- ✘ I collected a few stories published within the past two years and here below is how we have presented them. The idea is to emphasize that the stories are mostly briefs and tacked somewhere inside newspaper pages irrespective of how important they are, and mostly they are not seen.
- ✘ In Kenya, livestock accounts for about 50 per cent of the country's entire agricultural sector, which is in turn forms 75 per cent of the economy. Livestock constitutes 10 per cent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and is the most important employer in the rural areas, in addition to contributing in a big way to food security. There are communities that rely solely on livestock for livelihood.
- ✘ It is, therefore, unbelievable that such an important sector has not received its fair share of the public eye.

✘ (US\$ = Ksh75)

- ✘ 1 - Ministry given Ksh1.1bn for drought-hit animals - reported because a minister said it - The Livestock Development ministry has been allocated Sh1.1 billion to ease the effects of drought. Minister Mohamed Abdi Kuti said yesterday in a speech read on his behalf at Ntulele in Narok North District that the funds would be used for livestock feed supplements and animal health intervention. He said the ministry had taken measures to control major livestock diseases through vaccinations and disease surveillance.
- ✘ 2 - Pastoralists embrace livestock programme
The government's drive to vaccinate hundreds of thousands of livestock across the country has received overwhelming support from pastoralist communities in the Tana Delta. The turnout for the National Livestock Emergency Drought Programme has been impressive so far, with over 27,200 animals having already been treated or vaccinated from various diseases and pests. The Coast provincial veterinary officer Nkari Gatumo said pastoralists in Msambweni and Kwale have also lauded the initiative, and stand to benefit greatly from their enthusiasm. "I'm very pleased with the number of animals brought for the drive so far, but still urge farmers to bring more of their livestock and take advantage of the project," said Dr Gatumo in Kwale yesterday. Speaking at the launch of the programme last week, Livestock minister Mohammed Kuti said the government had released Sh95 million to repair dilapidated machines at the Kenya Meat Commission in Athi River, and urged farmers to ensure their animals were healthy before selling them off.

- ✘ 3 Alert of anthrax outbreak A high alert has been sounded over possible outbreak of anthrax in Nyamira district. District veterinary officer Dr Guto Onchoke yesterday said mass compulsory vaccination had been mounted to contain the disease. He said cases of blackquarter and rabies had also been detected. "We are going to vaccinate all animals against the three diseases," he said. Anthrax killed one person and 45 others were hospitalised in Masaba district last month.
- ✘ 4. Health workers on high alert as ministry works out strategy to cushion tourism (Notice the difference here - because it touches on Tourism)
- ✘ The Tourism ministry yesterday took swift action to protect the multi-billion shilling sector, in the wake of a confirmed case of swine flu in Kenya. A crisis meeting to formulate a plan to counter the effects of the first reported case in the country of the H1N1 strain of swine flu is scheduled for this morning. Tourism assistant minister Cecily Mbarire said the ministry would take measures to protect the sector, now approaching its high season, from any negative consequences of the disease. The World Health Organisation (WHO) a fortnight ago held an emergency meeting of experts to discuss the spreading virus. Currently, the alert level for the disease is Phase5 on the WHO's 6-level pandemic alert scale.

- ✘ WHO figures show there have been 27,737 cases reported in 74 countries to date, including 141 deaths. Last week, health officials were investigating a suspected case of the flu that was referred to Kenyatta National Hospital and yesterday, the results returned positive. But Ms Mbarire said the Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation could contain the spread of the disease. "The ministry (of Health) is completely able to contain the disease. We are in touch with them and the focus now is to prevent a second case being reported in the country," said the Runyenjes MP on the phone. She expressed confidence that the report would not impact negatively on the tourism industry, noting that the disease was curable. "Health officials are on high alert at all entry points," said Ms Mbarire. And to roll out a coordinated response, an official from the Health ministry is expected to deliver a report to the Tourism ministry's crisis management committee. "We are alive to the dangers of the revelations but we should not panic. This is a treatable disease but everything will be done to prevent it spreading," she said. However, there are growing concerns over Kenya's ability to prevent the spread of the flu or treat possible victims. An apparent lack of coordinated response could pose serious challenges in the wake of an outbreak.

- ✘ Kenya faces the same challenge as other countries around the world – the lack of a vaccine to prevent the spread of the virus. A vaccine is currently being developed, but medical experts predict that it may be four to six months before it is ready. There have been some initial efforts to prepare for a potential outbreak. Kenya's WHO representative, Dr David Okello said yesterday that the country had already been stocked up with Tamiflu, an anti-viral medicine known to reduce symptoms of the flu. Worldwide, it is one of the first line drugs available to treat the symptoms of H1N1 flu. Dr Okello said the stock of drugs, enough to treat 50,000 people, was donated to the Health ministry. On Saturday, Public Health Minister Beth Mugo announced that the government had received the drugs. Following yesterday's confirmation of the first case of swine flu, Mrs Mugo said the medicine would be made available in both government and private clinics. But she added that only severe cases shall be provided with Tamiflu. But when contacted yesterday, Kenyatta National Hospital director Jotham Micheni said that he had no information about the Tamiflu stockpile. "I am not aware of any drug donation, I am hearing it from you," he said. But he added that he was confident that the government would provide the medicine when the need arose. However, Dr Micheni added that the country's biggest referral hospital would not be able to adequately handle cases in the event of an outbreak, because KNH was already swamped with patients. "Our wards are full, we will not be able to make provisions for isolated sections," he said. Officials at Aga Khan Hospital said they had identified an isolation room and stocked up on treatment drugs and protective face masks.

- ✘ At the AU summit in Maputo, Mozambique in 2003, African leaders pledged to allocate 10 per cent of their national budgets to agriculture within five years, in recognition of the fact that 30 per cent of Africans are chronologically undernourished and that the continent had become a net importer of food. AU heads of state committed themselves to increasing budgets for agriculture, including livestock. But the continent is far from achieving this target, observed Tunusiime. For example, Kenya's budgetary allocation for agriculture stands at 4.5 per cent. "I think it is extremely important to step up efforts in livestock development because empirical evidence indicates that at the household level, livestock improves lives of the poor better than crop-related agriculture.
- ✘ The dynamism of the livestock sub-sector is unquestionable. It accounts for over 50 per cent of the agricultural capital stock in sub-Saharan Africa and is a significant contributor to agricultural GDP, according to the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Livestock is also a major source of food, particularly of high-quality protein, minerals, vitamins as well as micronutrients for the majority of people in Africa. It is estimated that meat, milk, and eggs provide about one fifth of the protein in African diets, says FAO.
Early warning

- ✘ 6- Vets on alert for diseases as animals flock Coast region
- ✘ The veterinary department at the Coast is on high alert for livestock diseases after more than 400,000 animals were moved to the region. The animals, from drought-hit parts of Rift Valley and North Eastern provinces, are now in Kwale, Msambweni, Kinango, Tana Delta and Lamu in search of pasture. The government's plans to buy the animals under the Sh500 million emergency scheme. Coast provincial director of veterinary services Nkari Gatumo said the government had also set aside funds to deal with any disease outbreak as a result of the influx. Kenya Red Cross latest report on the drought situation says most livestock have migrated from the dry hinterland areas to the Tana Delta. "The migration is feared to deplete the resources in those areas much faster since the range is rated far below normal," said the report.
- ✘ 7- West pokot Sh400m lost to animal disease
- ✘ Pastoralists in the region have lost Sh400 million worth of animals after an outbreak of a livestock disease in the past three years. District veterinary officer Charles Toroitich yesterday said peste des petits ruminants had killed over 200,000 sheep and goats since 2006. Speaking at his Kapenguria office, the officer said the quarantine imposed on livestock trade three years ago had been lifted. Kapenguria MP Julius Murgor asked the government to help pastoralists to restock.

- ✘ 8- EAC joins forces with researchers to boost region's livestock sector
The East African Community is working with livestock researchers to expand market opportunities for farm animals. The plan is aimed at enhancing livestock production, marketing and trade through the extensive utilisation of genetic resources and the development of dry lands. "To ensure smooth livestock trading, the EAC has already developed sanitary and phytosanitary standards measures and procedures for animals, fish and fisheries," a livestock and fisheries officer at EAC, Mr Timothy Wesonga, said.
With the support of the International Livestock Research Institute, livestock keepers in the region stand to benefit from new products and tools developed from biotechnology. Already, EAC is working on the harmonisation of policies and programmes touching on diseases, breeding and the impact of livestock keeping on the environment and human health risks.
Mr Wesonga said that the EAC has put in place various structures to guide prevention and control of transboundary animal diseases. These include the EAC regional steering and technical committees on transboundary animal diseases.
Also ongoing is a programme to control of transboundary animal diseases in conjunction with the human health sector and other stakeholders.
An EU funded project has already kicked off to prepare the EAC region's response to avian influenza in the event of an outbreak. "The project objective is to contribute to the socio-economic welfare and public health in the EAC by minimizing the impact of Avian Influenza," Mr Wesonga said.

- ✘ Sh1.6bn to fight animal disease
The Government will spend Sh1.6 billion to fight a disease that threatens more than 15 million goats and sheep. The vaccination campaign against the deadly peste des petit ruminant (ppr) which targets more than 50 districts in four provinces started at Merti in Isiolo. The PPR outbreak began in 2006 and has spread to 17 districts in the country. It has wiped out 2.5 million sheep and goats, putting the livelihood of millions of people in arid and semi arid regions at risk. Launching the campaign at the weekend, Vice-President Kalonzo Musyoka said the Government will ensure the disease is eradicated in five years. The VP said the campaign, which will take a month, was free and compulsory. "The veterinary officers will carry out simultaneous vaccination campaigns in eight block regions covering all infected and high risk areas," said the Vice President.
Mr Musyoka explained that the Grand Coalition government has put in place strategies to revamp the livestock industry through the sinking of boreholes for water, construction of dams, setting up of slaughterhouses as well as sourcing more export markets in Europe, Middle East and Seychelles. "For us to export more meat products to better markets, we have to ensure that our meat is disease free," said the VP.
The plans also include construction of an international airport at Isiolo to boost exports and tourism.

- ✘ He said policies and laws governing livestock development will be reviewed to make them relevant to current realities. At the same time, Mr Musyoka noted that the Government, through the Ministry of Livestock Development, will put in place appropriate and cost effective breeding technology to improve livestock species especially in the arid and semi arid areas, for higher productivity and better incomes. Speaking at Merti, the VP said livestock development was a crucial component in a poverty eradication and wealth creation strategy spear-headed by government.
According to Livestock Development permanent secretary Patrick Khaemba, nearly 23 million sheep and goats worth Sh16.1 billion were likely to die of the disease.
More than 58 per cent of the animals are in the dry regions, are most susceptible to the plague. Samburu West and East, Pokot, Marakwet, Baringo and Keiyo were among the most affected areas.

- ✘ 11- Animal-spread diseases a looming disaster in ill-prepared Africa
- ✘ Last year's outbreaks of the deadly Marburg and Ebola Hemorrhagic Fever (EHF) viruses in southwestern Uganda and in the neighboring Democratic Republic of Congo's (DRC) province of Kasal Occidental and the sporadic outbreaks of Avian Influenza (Bird Flu) across the continent once again bring to light the threat zoonotic diseases pose to sub-Saharan Africa in particular and the world generally.
According to recent analysis more than 60 per cent of the estimated 1,415 infectious diseases known to modern medicine are capable of infecting both animals and humans. Most of these diseases such as anthrax, Rift Valley fever and monkey pox are zoonotic, meaning they originated in animals but have crossed the species barrier to infect people.
It is estimated that about 75 per cent of the new diseases that have affected humans over the past 10 years have been caused by pathogens (infective agents) originating from animals or animal products. This was the case of the HIV- the virus that causes Aids, which experts believe jumped the Darwinian divide from apes to humans.
Such diseases are of course not confined to the developing world. In 2003 there was an outbreak of human monkey-pox in the American states of Illinois, Indiana and Wisconsin. Human monkey-pox is a rare zoonotic viral disease that occurs primarily in equatorial West and central Africa.

✘ The outbreak in America occurred when a Wisconsin prairie-dog dealer allowed several of his animals to mix with rodents recently imported from Ghana that happened to be carrying the Monkey-pox virus. Luckily, no one died despite there being 71 reported cases of the disease in six mid-western states. And it isn't only humans who are at risk of disease. Domestic animals, as the bird flu (H5N10) or Avian Influenza outbreaks in Asia, Europe and Africa have proven, are equally vulnerable to infectious ailments. Livestock agriculture is the most important industry across sub-Saharan Africa, and disease is its biggest enemy. Overall, the industry represents 25 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the region, and, in certain countries, provides enough stock for export. However, compared with other parts of the world, Sub-Saharan Africa has the heaviest burden of animal diseases. For example, 12 out of the 15 diseases that were considered by the Office Internationale des Epizooties (OIE) as the most contagious are found in Africa. According to experts, Africa is not threatened by a single malaise such as HIV and Aids or Avian Influenza but by a combination of various human, plant and animal diseases, which can have potentially devastating social, environmental and economic effects.

✘ But why has there been a rise of new zoonotic diseases such as West Nile Fever, Rift Valley Fever, Marburg and the emergence of new virulent organisms when health care throughout the world is arguably the best it has ever been in the history of humanity? The misuse of antibiotics by Sub-Saharan Africans is one key consideration. Patients in poor areas of the continent have poor prescriptions habits by not taking the full dosage of their prescribed medications. Furthermore, even if the patient in question is taking the proper dosages, many Africans are unable to afford the necessary full course antibiotic prescriptions. There is also the lack of government regulation of pharmacies many of which sell drugs without a physician's prescription. Rapid population growth in sub-Saharan Africa is also another important factor. Along with population increase comes the need for more arable and grazing land and the exploration of new forest, swamp and cave habitats. This raises the likelihood of exposure to "new" infectious agents in those environments, and could result in the emergence of new disease pathogens. The rural-urban migration in Africa could also increase the outbreak of new pathogens. Such mass movement of up-country populations, particularly those fleeing conflicts in their home areas where health services infrastructure are weak, could bring new infections to already settled populations in towns and cities.

✘ As population grows there is also an increase in the demand for food. In sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere, people are more and more turning to wild animals for food. This high demand for bush meat in the countries of the Congo Basin is helping to fuel the increase in outbreaks of such illnesses as Ebola Hemorrhagic Fever (EHF), Ebola, like the HIV virus that causes Aids, passed into the human population through contact with blood from infected primates such as gorillas and chimpanzees as well as other primates like monkeys who regularly from part of the bush meat trade. However, the multi-billion dollar bush meat industry is a key contributor to local economies throughout the developing world. It is also among the most immediate threats to tropical wildlife. The consumption of bush meat is particularly acute across west and central Africa where there are still large equatorial forests. In fact, the Congo River Basin is home to one of the biggest expanse of tropical rainforest in the world. Cameroon, Central African Republic, Democratic Republic of Congo, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and the Republic of Congo have a combined forest area of 1,855,207 – one of the largest in the world. Add to this the estimated combined forest and urban population of the Congo Basin of 5432,945,932 who consume an astonishing 1,196,395,911 Kilograms (one million to five million tonnes) of bush meat annually. You now appreciate why wildlife conservationist call it the Bush meat crisis.

✘ These vast forest areas harbour various monkey and antelope species. But its Africa's highly endangered Great Apes: gorillas, chimpanzees and bonobos whose very existence is being severely affected by the bush meat trade as well as EHF outbreaks. Recent scientific surveys of great ape populations in Gabon, which has one of the largest populations, indicates that the numbers of gorillas and chimpanzees declined by more than half between 1983 and 2000. But it is not only the bush meat trade that has decimated the ape population of West and Central Africa. Ebola has killed tens of thousands of gorillas and chimpanzees. But the bush meat trade in sub-Saharan Africa has also been linked to the decline of fish stocks in West Africa. According to experts people substitute wildlife for fish in ears of fish scarcity. In 2005 researchers found that declining fish stocks were fuelling a multibillion-dollar meat trade in West Africa. In Ghana more than half of the country's 20 million people reside within 100 kilometres of the coast, where fish is the primary source of proteins and income. However, using 30-year data collected monthly by rangers in six nature reserves in Ghana, researchers have found a direct link between fish supply and the demand for bush meat in Ghanaian villages. Looking at data for the years 1970 to 1998, researchers found that in 14 local food markets, residents substituted bush meat as an alternative to fish and the number of poachers observed by rangers in parks increased when fish supply was limited or its price increased.

✘ During the same period trawler surveys conducted in the Gulf of Guinea, off Ghana's coast, since 1970 along with other regional stock assessments, estimate that fish biomass in near-shore and off-shore waters have declined by at least 50 per cent. In the same period, there has been a threefold increase in human population in the region. The researchers suspect the decline in the availability of fish at local Ghanaian markets is linked to heavy over-fishing in the Gulf of Guinea. The Gulf of Guinea is one of the most over fished areas of the world. Declines in fish stocks in waters off West Africa have coincided with more than ten-fold increases in regional fish harvests by foreign and domestic fleets since 1950. Shipping fleets subsidized by the European Union (EU) have consistently had the largest foreign presence off West Africa, with EU fish harvests there increasing 20 times from 1950 to 2001. Until the larger issue of international fish export agreements, increased populations and increased demand for food is addressed, local level efforts to prevent the extinction of wildlife species will be very difficult. As the outbreaks of zoonotic diseases increase, indigenous Africans (and others communities in developing countries) might hold the key to disease prevention and containment. Some pioneers in the field of modern medical anthropology agree that the global fight against emerging zoonotic diseases as well as re-emerging contagious and infectious ailments in Sub-Saharan Africa and elsewhere has failed to incorporate traditional African medicine for disease control and prevention.

✘ This negative attitude towards indigenous notions of infectious/contagious diseases stems largely from the assumption that African health beliefs are primarily based on witchcraft, sorcery or black magic. Experts have indeed found this to be true in the realm of mental illness in sub-Saharan Africa (perhaps due to a superficial likeness between possession by spirits and symptoms of some mental illnesses) but curiously not so when it comes to infectious diseases. "Western medical science has long dismissed African indigenous (and by extension, other indigenous) medical theories as superstitious gibberish, unworthy of serious consideration," writes anthropologist Edward C. Green, now a Senior Research Scientist at the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies. The popular media has to share some of the blame. Hollywood stereotypes of leopard-skin-clad witchdoctors reciting magical incantations to the beat of throbbing drums pervade our Western notions of how Africans deal with illness. However the main culprits, says Dr Green, have been contemporary anthropologists as well as some of the most famous ethnographers of the early 20th century. This lot has largely ignored the ethnographic evidence, which pointed to the fact that infectious diseases were looked upon by sub-Saharan Africa as having naturalistic and not supernatural origins. Such intransigence by the Western medical fraternity as well as Western-trained African healthcare workers will only hamper current efforts to control and prevention of the spread of the latest zoonotic threat to the African continent, Avian Influenza. So far only 40 Africans are known to have been infected with the potentially fatal disease.

✘ However, a recent report by Folorunso O. Fasina and colleagues in The Lancet Infectious Diseases says that Africa is incapable of fighting an Avian Influenza epidemic. According to the report the African strain of H5N1 has acquired "troubling" properties such as respiratory rather than faecal transmission in poultry and a mutation associated with increased spread of disease in mammals, including humans. Furthermore, the possibility of human infection on the continent is increased by inefficient diagnosis, denial of outbreaks, inter-ethnic crisis, politicisation of the issue, poor reporting surveillance and communication risks. A large-scale epidemic of Avian Influenza could happen in Africa if the virus changes so that human to human transmission occurs, say experts. If it does millions of people could die as a result. In fact, some observers predict that such an epidemic could be just as devastating to the continent as the rinderpest epidemic was back in the 1890s and the HIV and Aids epidemic of today. For starters, surveillance systems in Africa are notoriously weak and are unable to detect early H5N1 outbreaks in poultry or wild birds. Control remains difficult because of the continent's ineffective border controls, overtaxed health-care systems and inadequate biosecurity. Furthermore, the crowding of poultry farms and the blossoming of live poultry markets promote the rapid spread of the disease, as do high-risk conditions and practices like the slaughter of sick birds in homes.

✘ The result of such an epidemic would have devastating socio-economic consequences. For example, African women might be particularly at risk. Epidemiological studies have shown that there is a higher likelihood of the transmission of Avian Influenza from poultry to humans through contact with infected poultry. As poultry in Africa is predominately managed by women, they may have a higher incidence of contracting H5N1 with the possibility of them passing it on to their children were the virus ever to make the big leap from bird to human transmission to human-to-human transmission. An epidemic outbreak of H5N1 could also lead to widespread micronutrient deficiencies, say experts. Even small reductions in meat and egg consumption can lead to large reductions of micronutrient intake. Therefore, there may be negative impacts on nutrition of people at risk such as children, women and people living with HIV and Aids. "In both Asia and Africa, meat and eggs from poultry are important sources of essential micronutrients for vulnerable groups, and poultry production is a central source of income for billions of poor people," says Dr Clare Narrod, International Food and Policy Research Institute Research Fellow. "Our goal is to help developing-country governments, civil society, and aid agencies make informed decisions so that the costs of controlling avian flu do not fall disproportionately on the rural poor, who consume their own poultry and rely on it for their livelihoods"

✘ The International Food and Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) in cooperation with the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) is assisting developing regions to protect their economic livelihood in case of an H5N1 epidemic outbreak. In May a \$7.8 million (Sh560 million) project was launched to assist poor farmers in developing countries to protect their livelihoods in the event of an avian flu outbreak. The IFPRI and the ILRI are conducting this research in Ethiopia, Indonesia, Kenya, Mali, and Nigeria, where experts will identify strategies, such as farmer compensation schemes, that can both control the disease and protect poor households from losing critical sources of income. Funded by the United Kingdom's Department for International Development, the project will also involve research in Cambodia, Thailand, and Vietnam, where investigators will be led by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations, the Royal Veterinary College and the University of California at Berkeley. The consequences for failed infectious disease control and eradication programs in Africa and elsewhere are alarming. Mark E.J Woolhouse and Sonya Gowtage-Sequeria of the Centre for Infectious Diseases, University of Edinburgh cite the failure of public health programs as one of the 10 drivers associated with the emergence and re-emergence of human pathogens. The research pair also ranked poor population health (e.g. HIV and malnutrition) as the third leading driver associated with the rise of human pathogens.

✘ WAJIR Livestock vaccinated against goat plague
 ✘ More than 60,000 domestic animals in Wajir have been vaccinated against a disease that has claimed thousands of goats in the past six months. The vaccination campaign in the past two weeks was carried out by the Veterinary Department and Aldef-Kenya, a non-governmental organisation. Wajir East veterinary officer Timothy Wambua said the disease - goat plague - had so far claimed more than 7,000 goats.
 ✘ The government's drive to vaccinate hundreds of thousands of livestock across the country has received overwhelming support from pastoralist communities in the Tana Delta. The turnout for the National Livestock Emergency Drought Programme has been impressive so far, with over 27,200 animals having already been treated or vaccinated from various diseases and pests. The Coast provincial veterinary officer Nkari Gatumo said pastoralists in Msambweni and Kwale have also lauded the initiative, and stand to benefit greatly from their enthusiasm. "I'm very pleased with the number of animals brought for the drive so far, but still urge farmers to bring more of their livestock and take advantage of the project," said Dr Gatumo in Kwale yesterday. Speaking at the launch of the programme last week, Livestock minister Mohammed Kuti said the government had released Sh98 million to repair dilapidated machines at the Kenya Meat Commission in Athi River, and urged farmers to ensure their animals were healthy before selling them off

✘ 12- Kenya could be hit by another round of the deadly Rift Valley Fever by the end of the year, a new UN study warns. The study published recently by the global body's arm, Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), says climate models studied this year predicted increased precipitation in the Horn of Africa. "FAO and the World Health Organisation warn countries in Africa and the Arabian Peninsula that the Rift Valley Fever may strike again at the end of 2008," says the report. Kenya lost over Sh2 billion in livestock deaths the last time the disease struck in 2006. Prediction The prediction is based on indications that the Horn of Africa is likely to experience prolonged rainfall towards the end of the year, which creates a conducive environment for the development of the disease. In semi-arid and arid areas, the disease occurs following long periods of unusually high rainfall and flooding. The alarm is expected to come in handy for Kenya after a serious blunder in 2006 when Government officials ignored a warning only for the country to be hit hard by an outbreak of the disease, that left more than 155 people dead and more than 700 others infected. At the time, the country did not even have a vaccine for the disease and had to import it from Ethiopia. North Eastern Province bore the brunt of the attack, with 333 cases of infections reported, closely followed by Rift Valley Province with 141 cases. Coast and Central provinces recorded 14 and 13 incidents respectively.

✘ The Ministry of Livestock Development has stepped up its fight against the dreaded goat plague (peste des petits ruminants or PPR) that is killing thousands of animals in most arid areas in the country. The Nation has learnt that a Cabinet meeting was called recently to discuss ways of containing the plague and to source emergency funds. The meeting also discussed the impact of the disease on the livelihoods of the vulnerable groups in the North Rift and north eastern Kenya. The issue of food security in the affected regions was also tabled. In addition, the Cabinet highlighted the proposed necessary measures to contain the spread and eradicate the disease to safeguard the livelihoods and arrest the associated food insecurity. According to Livestock Development permanent secretary Patrick Khaemba, about 23 million sheep and goats valued at Sh16.1 billion were likely to die of the disease. More than 58 per cent of the animals are in the Arid and Semi-Arid Lands (Asal), which are most susceptible to the plague. Mr Khaemba said that about 10 million people depended on the animals for their livelihood. The animals were the source of meat, milk, blood and income. Main casualties

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Main casualties

- The country has had to import the vaccine after the goat and sheep disease spread to Kenya from Sudan due to increased cross-border movement of livestock often occasioned by cattle rustling.

The PS recalled that farmers also imported vaccines from South Africa when the SAT1 (South Africa Type One) strain of the foot and mouth disease broke out in 1999.

However, he promised that the veterinary drugs institute would come up with the vaccine in six months.

Prior to March 2006, Kenya was free of PPR, a highly infectious disease of sheep and goats described by scientists as the most destructive viral disease of small ruminants.

The first case of PPR was reported in Oropoi and Lokichoggio divisions of Turkana District, but the disease has since spread to 16 other districts in the North Rift and North Eastern Province.

The disease has an infection rate of about 50 to 100 per cent with associated death rates of 60 to 80 per cent in affected flocks. Households have lost about half of their entire small ruminants.

This has resulted in reduced household purchasing power, a situation made worse due to imposed quarantines and closure of livestock markets. And the herders therefore cannot sell their animals to get money to buy the already highly-priced food items.

Livestock traders, butchers as well as hides and skins dealers in the affected districts are experiencing hard times given that the prices of sheep and goats have dropped by up to 90 per cent.

- The prices of cattle have also dropped as much.

Annually, the disease infects up to 3.6 million goats of which 1.5 million die.

"Since 2006, more than five million sheep and goats have been infected while over two million have died," said the Livestock permanent secretary, noting that the annual loss attributed to the disease stood at more than Sh1 billion.

The current drought in Asals is further fanning the spread of the disease due to the high convergence of animals in the few watering points and pastures.

Control measures

A report presented to the Cabinet by the parliamentary committee on agriculture, land and environment says that while food shortages are being felt at producer level, the country will experience red meat shortages in the medium and long term.

The report says that many households are coping with the hard times by seeking relief food, turning to the Constituency Development Fund for assistance, burning charcoal and cutting firewood for sale. Others are consuming wild fruits and tubers, taking one meal in a day and withdrawing children from school.

The food security implications of PPR are huge and, therefore, urgent measures need to be taken to contain its spread and eradicate it.

After the disease is contained, mechanisms aimed at rehabilitating the livelihoods of the affected communities will need to be put in place through restocking.

According to Mr Khaemba, the ministry has applied several control measures to combat the outbreak of the disease, including PPR surveillance, animal movement restrictions (quarantines) and vaccinations.

- So far, about 2.5 million animals (11 per cent of the total population) have been vaccinated. The UN Food and Agricultural Organisation has supported the ministry's efforts by providing two million doses of the vaccine.

Reduce prevalence

The United Nations Development Programme has pledged US\$300,000 (Sh20 million) for emergency control of PPR.

However, the PS says a number of challenges, such as inadequate funding for disease control; the highly infectious nature of the disease; mobility of pastoral systems in search of water, pasture and markets; inadequate personnel and transport logistics; and lengthy vaccine procurement processes have remained major constraints to containing the disease.

The Cabinet developed a proposal comprising two phases, the emergency phase and the non-emergency phase, to contain the problem.

The emergency phase measures will aim at preventing further spread and minimise the prevalence of the disease in the affected areas.

The non-emergency phase will aim at reducing national prevalence of PPR from the current level to less than 10 per cent. The five-year project will cost Sh1.66 billion.

The emergency phase will require Sh557 million.

- As you can see, there is need for media training on reporting in this area. Other sectors occasionally do it with successful results and I believe the same can be done on animal health issues. Let's see who will champion it.

- Thank you.