

Keeping Broilers: Common causes of losses and their solutions

Taruvinga Magwirotu

Here is an article that I want every broiler farmer to read, print out and move around with it!

The trick in broiler production is to prevent illness. Once you start having large losses/deaths, you would have failed in preventing diseases. Here is how you do it, and why you do it.

The first thing to note about broilers is that, even at 6 weeks, they are literally young chicks (hukwana) in the ordinary sense. Why? Because chickens reach puberty around 20 weeks, that's when we consider them adult birds. So what does this mean?

It means broilers have the same sensitivities/weaknesses as any young animal: immature immunity system means they can easily get ill from infections which can be resisted by older birds.

Solution: Keep young birds away from older birds. Avoid mixing them because older birds may harbour or keep bugs that are harmless to them, but can cause illnesses in broilers because of their immature immune system.

Solution: Keep the bugs away. Disinfect premises. The idea of disinfecting premises and general good hygiene is still about our young baby: the broiler. Think of the human baby and the care we take to keep it warm, well-bundled, out of weather extremes etc. Same should apply to broilers, for similar reasons.

Problem: Fast muscle growth v internal organs. Broilers are bred for meat. Therefore they have quick growth of muscles as opposed to other organs. It is not a natural situation. As such broilers do suffer from such physiology-related problems as leg/bone problems. Sometimes the body becomes too heavy for the leg bones. This can be made worse if there are deficiencies in minerals or vitamins that promote bone development. Sometimes the body can be too big for the heart, and you can have heart failure and circulatory problems which can then be complicated by other infection. Ascites (fluid in the stomach cavity/mvura mudumbu) is common condition at peak growth (4/5 weeks) and causes a number of deaths.

Solution: Watch out for leg problems. Determine the cause quickly, but always have the possibility at the back of your mind calcium/phosphorus/selenium/vitamin A, E, deficiencies. Multi-vitamin and multi-mineral supplements help.

Specific diseases: Chickens suffer from a lot of diseases; I do not even want to mention them. Because broilers have a relatively short life-span (+ 6 weeks), most farmers do not see the need to

vaccinate. In any case, if you buy your stock from a well-established source, vaccination is done at the hatchery before chicks are sold to farmers.

Non-specific infections: Actually, these are the major causes of loss. These are infections associated with poor environmental hygiene or immune-suppression, or both. Poor hygiene causes the accumulation of bacteria/bugs in the environment. The bugs infect the chick, causing illness. If birds are stressed for any reason (poor animal welfare), system is lowered, thereby making the animal to succumb to free-living bacteria found in the environment.

Final Solution: Keep your animals in good welfare. Take your notebook and have a checklist: ventilation (ammonia smell?; cold draughts); temperature (too hot or cold); hygiene (what does your eyes tell you?, wet bedding? Dirty birds?; disease (check respiration more specifically-any kokoro-kokoro (rales) sound?); density (do they look over-crowded?) bedding (very important because it can actually be a major source of infection: is it clean, dry, not dusty? Straw is best, though any alternative is good, as long as the particles are not too fine. Saw-dust (fine particles is a big no-compromises health of workers too!)).

Happy farming, see you in next instalments!