

## **January Disease: Implications for rural development in Zimbabwe**

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The statistics of animals which have died from Theileriosis in Zimbabwe between 2017 and 2018 make for grim reading. According to *The Chronicle* of 27 June 2018, Zimbabwe lost 3430 cattle from tick-borne diseases between November 2017 and May 2018. Theileriosis has been the chief culprit, claiming 1751 of those deaths. We have situations where farmers have lost entire herds. Though this is certainly a nation-wide epidemic, Chikomba and Buhera Districts have been particularly severely affected.

What is known about this problem? First is that Theileriosis is a tick-borne disease (TBD). TBDs are diseases transmitted by ticks. So the simple conclusion would be: control the vector, control the disease.

Well, on the ground, the situation is not as simple. In the communal or smallholder areas, tick control in Zimbabwe has been government responsibility since the colonial times. However, tick-control programmes have discontinued in most areas as a result of the general economic constraints facing the government today. There is no money to purchase dipping chemicals, and individual farmers who have been used to government subsidy have been slow to understand the implications of not dipping on their animals.

Another important issue to understand is how “enzootic stability” works. Enzootic diseases are those diseases that have always been found within a particular area. As such the animals born in that area have come to have a degree of immunity because of the constant exposure to the disease challenge. However, Theileriosis has not been widespread in Zimbabwe, being confined to small areas around Harare highveld where the tick vector thrives in mild temperatures. This means that cattle in most areas in Zimbabwe were not used to this disease, hence the unprecedented fatalities where it is introduced. Indiscriminate movement certainly spread the tick vector around the country, itself evidence of breakdown of one of the strongest disease-control regimes in Africa.

Another important variable has been that because of its relatively localised importance, Theileriosis has not been emphasised in pre-service extension curriculums in Zimbabwe. In a study that I conducted in 2017 on the training needs of Veterinary Extension Assistants, I found that generally, field level workers struggled to make a correct diagnosis of Theileriosis, for the reasons adduced above. 50% of the respondents got the diagnosis of January Disease

wrong in the test. 87% of the respondents did not know the drug used to treat January Disease.

Other facets like treatment, disease control and legal implications follow from a correct diagnosis. The logic of this observation is that in clinical practice, once the diagnosis is missed, all the other facets of disease management like specific drug treatment, supportive therapy and control are likely to be all missed as well.

Chances are actually high that the statistics quoted at the beginning of this article are a tip of the iceberg. If we also take into account that some farmers do not report the deaths of their animals, it is possible that the problem is much bigger than meets the eye.

That said, it is also true that farmers do not prioritise dipping as part of their general investment in their livestock projects. Many are willing to accept the death of their animals as opposed to buying dip chemicals to prevent animal deaths.

In my own experience, most farmers do not see their animals in terms of business. They have a pride in cattle as wealth and as representing a connection with the land, but hardly in terms of business. So to most people, spending USD 100.00 on chemicals to save USD 1000.00 losses does not even arise. Most do not reckon their animal wealth in USD terms anyway.

From a sustainable development perspective, there are important implications to glean from this situation. One is that, in order “not to leave anyone behind”, government intervention in tick control is vital. The poorest of the poor who own one or two beasts can easily be plunged into downward spiral due to TBDs. Beef off-take has suffered greatly in the period under review, with beef prices skyrocketing due to supply problems. Protein has simply become unaffordable for the poor, especially the urban poor. Strengthening the agricultural support departments is in fact one of the most critical intervention to support rural transformation, one which is unfortunately not getting as much attention as it should.