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Rosalie Zara, poultry farmer in the far north of Cameroon

Cameroon's poultry sector owes its survival to the country's ban on imported poultry cuts, decided by public authorities in 2005. But a resurgence of bird-flu outbreaks since 2016 has weakened and disorganised the sector, which is still dependent on imported chicks and hatching eggs.

Cameroon's poultry sector is counting on state support to reduce its dependence on key imported inputs

The most recent bird-flu crisis to hit Cameroon's poultry sector was a few months ago. It originated not locally, but in Europe, which supplies premix feeds, vaccines, medicine, day-old chicks and hatching eggs to Cameroon. In November 2020, the H5N1 strain of bird flu broke out on livestock farms in several supplier countries in central Europe, including France, Belgium and the Netherlands. Cameroon's Ministry of Livestock, Fisheries, and Animal Industries (MINEPIA) promptly banned imports of day-old chicks and hatching eggs from countries affected by the virus. That decision came at a time when commercial flights between Europe and Africa were down 80% because of the Covid-19 crisis.

The resilient poultry sector began to resist inflation in input prices. Hatcheries were barely able to cover 60% of local demand for day-old chicks. After the closing of the borders in March, the average price of a day-old chick supplied to farmers by local hatcheries rose from 400 FCFA to 700 FCFA. On the market in 2021, households were spending 4,500 FCFA – and in some cases 5,000 FCFA – to buy a live 2kg chicken, which cost between 2,700 FCFA and 3,000 FCFA the previous year. Rising chicken prices and scarcity became unbearable in a country where poultry meat accounts for over 40% of the animal proteins consumed by people. The sector employs 320,000 people (140,000 direct jobs, and 180,000 indirect jobs).

The public authorities started to take action. Cameroon's minister of livestock, Dr Taïga, wrote a letter to Brazil's ambassador to Cameroon requesting measures to facilitate the export of day-old chicks and hatching eggs to Cameroon from Brazil, which was free of bird flu in 2021. As fate would have it, the letter from MINEPIA was dated 22 March 2021, just two days after the funeral of Bernard Njonga, politician and head of the Citizens' Association for the Defence of Collective Interests (ACDIC), who worked tirelessly in support of Cameroon's food sovereignty. The polemic caused by this coincidence drove MINEPIA to deny any desire to import chicken to Cameroon. François Djonou, president of the Cameroon Poultry Interprofessional Organisation (IPAVIC), regretted the incident and admitted that IPAVIC had been consulted about the Brazilian option.

A strong voice

Since its creation in 2006, after Cameroon's 2005 ban on imported poultry cuts, IPAVIC has been a strong interlocutor, respected and even feared by the public authorities. It is the most structured and influential farmers' organisation in Cameroon after the cocoa and coffee interprofessional organisation, which has long received state support.

IPAVIC was born from the ashes of the Cameroon Interprofessional Union for the

Poultry Sector (SIFAC), founded in 1996 by industrial firms in the sector. Not open to small farmers, the union withered and fell into decline. When it was founded in 2006, IPAVIC was able to bring together all trades in the sector, including both small and large operators, to build a strong value chain. IPAVIC is divided into four groups of actors. The first group comprises industrial hatcheries, provender producers and abattoirs, and has 45% of the votes at IPAVIC's general assembly. The second group comprises producers and sellers of table eggs, and has 25% of the votes. The third group comprises breeders and sellers of broilers, and has 20% of the votes. And the fourth group comprises animal-health technicians, and has 10% of the votes.

The year it was founded, IPAVIC faced a bird-flu crisis. The carcass of an infected migratory bird was found in the northern part of the country, leading to harsh criticism of chicken meat and causing panic among consumers, who stopped buying poultry products for months. The crisis was made worse when neighbouring countries – which absorb roughly 60% of the eggs produced in Cameroon – decided to stop importing poultry products from Cameroon.

The period from March to May 2006 was a very bleak time for the country's farms. Downstream on livestock farms, broilers were stuck on farms and fed beyond 45 days, and then sold for practically nothing. Orders for chicks were cancelled, and mountains of table eggs were incinerated. Upstream at hatcheries, the only options were to destroy hatching eggs, suffocate chicks and slaughter parents for meat. Provender-production activities were practically at a standstill, and the small pluckers who slaughtered chickens at the chicken markets lost their jobs.

In an attempt to save the damaged sector, Ahmadou Moussa, director of the Mvog-Betsi Poultry Complex in Yaoundé and IPAVIC's first president, organised local-chicken tastings with actors from civil society in order to show Cameroonians that chicken could still be eaten. This desperate measure helped in part to restore consumer trust, and, naturally, people began eating chicken again. What's strange about the 2006 bird-flu crisis is that aside from the migratory-bird carcass, not a single chicken died from H5N1 on any of the country's farms. Total losses were 3 billion FCFA.

Accused by civil society of complicit silence with the intention of breaking up the local poultry sector in order to bring back imported frozen chicken, which would benefit a number of government officials financially, the government announced unprecedented support measures. A recovery plan for the sector was established with over half a billion FCFA in funding provided by the state, and with IPAVIC serving as interlocutor. In 2008, a budget of 350 million FCFA was mobilised to subsidise the restocking of parent stock on farms in order to resume production of day-old chicks. An additional 231 million FCFA was mobilised to import hatching eggs for chick production while waiting for the new parents to lay.

THE 2005 BAN ON IMPORTED FROZEN CHICKEN LED PEOPLE TO BELIEVE THAT THE NATIONAL SECTOR WOULD QUICKLY GROW

Support from the public authorities

The state's support was seen differently by the IPAVIC groups. Small family livestock farmers (who make up over 90% of local livestock farmers) felt that they had been wronged by the allocation of subsidies to industrial firms. IPAVIC nearly imploded. Another union of poultry farmers was founded in 2008, drawing a number of people who were dissatisfied with the system. But lacking resources and much-needed support from the public authorities, the new union collapsed.

The second major bird-flu crisis was more brutal, and broke out at the Mvog-Betsi Poultry Complex (Complexe Avicole de Mvog-Betsi, or "CAM") in Yaoundé in May 2016. With losses estimated at 10 billion FCFA, the crisis severely harmed the sector, which was enjoying sound growth at the time. This time, it was a real H5N1 flu epidemic. In just one day, the virus killed 15,000 of CAM's parent birds. The remaining 33,000 parent birds were culled. Farms in the West, South and Adamawa regions were also affected. CAM, which supplied 20% of the local production of day-old chicks in Cameroon, never resumed operations, and its 100 employees lost their jobs.

IPAVIC relentlessly demanded compensation for its members who were affected by the bird flu. But in the absence of direct subsidies for the interprofessional body in 2016, the state officially suspended payment of the value added tax (VAT) on food, medicine, hatching eggs, day-old chicks and imported livestock-farming equipment. In Cameroon, VAT is 19.25%. This support from the public authorities is helping the poultry sector become more resilient to crises.

But there is still a weak link in Cameroon's poultry value chain. The development of abattoirs and facilities for packaging local ready-to-cook chicken is still lacking. Slaughtering is still performed mainly by small artisanal pluckers working around the markets where live chickens are sold. The 2005 ban on imported frozen chicken led people to believe that the national sector would quickly grow, supplying cuts of local chicken for the local market. And that the sector would expand to other markets in central Africa. We're not there yet. But that is the dream inspired by the industrial firms belonging to IPAVIC, several of whom are already delivering eggs to neighbouring countries. ■

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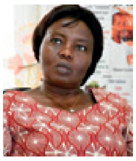

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