

Village chickens, food security and HIV/AIDS mitigation

Robyn Alders, Ana Bela Cambaza and Mohamed Harun.

AusAID Southern Africa Newcastle Disease Control Project, Maputo.

E-mail: robyn@tropical.co.mz; Website: <http://www.vsap.uq.edu.au/ruralpoultry>

Village chickens can be found in all developing countries and play a vital role in many poor rural households. For instance, they provide scarce animal protein in the form of meat and eggs and can be sold or bartered to meet essential family needs such as medicine, clothes and school fees. Village chickens are active in pest control, provide manure, are required for special festivals and are essential for many traditional ceremonies. The chickens are usually raised under extensive, low input production systems (Table 1). They are generally owned and managed by women and children and are often essential elements of female-headed households.

Table 1: Comparison of village and commercial chickens.

Feature	Village Chickens	Commercial Chickens
Labour inputs	Minimal	Considerable
Housing	Trees; chicken houses of local material; inexpensive	Chicken unit using conventional materials; expensive
Nutrition	Scavenging feed resource base, leftover food, cereals, no supplements; inexpensive	Balanced commercial ration; expensive
Water	Well water, used water, natural sources	Clean water supply essential
Production	Low; could improve with better nutrition, disease control and shelter from predators	High; but require a high level of inputs
Meat quality	Little fat; pleasant flavour; preferred texture	More fat; less flavour; poorer texture
Adaptability	Good: good flight skills, more likely to escape predators, can scavenge for own food	Limited: poor flight skills, easily caught by predators, less skilled at scavenging
Veterinary inputs	None; ND vaccination	Control of many viral, bacterial and parasitic diseases essential for efficient production
Environmental impact	Minimal: can be positive through provision of organic fertilizer and pest control	Negative: intensive production of cereals for rations; occasional improper use of antibiotics, excess ammonia production.

In households affected by HIV/AIDS, where labour is in short supply, village chickens provide a source of high quality nutrition and income without requiring much in the way of labour or financial inputs. Eggs, in particular, offer a great nutritional bargain: they contain approximately 315 kilojoules and are one of the best quality protein sources known. Eggs also supply an array of vitamins such as A and B12, and they are one of the best food sources of vitamin K, a bone-boosting nutrient. Eggs also provide choline, a B vitamin that plays a role in brain development.

When considering supporting village chicken production, it is advisable to perform a situation analysis to determine:

- What is currently happening with village chicken production in the target areas?
- What are the current constraints to production?
- What options are available to reduce the impact of the identified constraints?

One of the major constraints to production of village chickens is Newcastle disease (ND). In countries where ND is enzootic, outbreaks of this disease regularly result in mortalities of 50 to 100 %. In developing countries where ND is not enzootic, outbreaks may occur less frequently but potential losses due to the disease make vaccination mandatory. The implementation of an effective ND control program in countries such as Mozambique, has resulted in increased chicken numbers, increased household purchasing power, increased home consumption of chicken products and increased decision-making power for women. Experience has shown that a sustainable ND control program is composed of four essential components: a) an appropriate vaccine and vaccine technology; b) effective extension materials and methodologies that target veterinary and extension staff as well as community vaccinators and farmers; c) simple evaluation and monitoring systems; and d) economic sustainability based on the commercialisation of the vaccine and vaccination services and the marketing of surplus chickens and eggs. ND control combined with improved husbandry is often the most cost-effective means of improving village chicken production.

The benefits of improved village chicken production include income generation and improved household food security. Families affected by HIV/AIDS will be more likely to make use of these benefits if veterinary services work in collaboration with the Ministries of Education and Health.

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