

OPINION PIECE

Foot and mouth disease outbreak in South Africa: Is the ban on movement of cattle anti-poor?

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The spread of foot and mouth disease (FMD) cases in South Africa has led to the government banning, as of 17 August 2022, the movement of cattle in the country, with the exception of cattle moving directly under Red Cross permit to an approved abattoir, and slaughter for own use or own consumption, or for cultural or ritual purposes.

While the intention of the government is noble, one wonders if the policymakers, including Parliament, took serious cognisance of the negative impact of their decisions or considered how anti-poor their decision is. There is no doubt that red meat prices will soon rise, and the rural poor will lose anticipated income from selling their cattle.

The first point I want to consider is: Where are the FMD outbreaks and cases located, or where were they detected? So far, they are in the commercial farming sector and not in the rural small-scale farming area of the so called "FMD Free Zone of South Africa".

It is therefore obvious that small-scale, poor rural farmers will be excluded from the value chain for weeks if not months, as less than 0,01% can afford to effectively raise and background their weaners to the extent that they could take the cattle directly to an approved abattoir for slaughter. We are also approaching the end of winter, by when most small-scale farmers would have used their available money to buy supplements in the form of fodder/winter lick for their cattle during the cold season and were looking forward to selling some of their cattle to supplement their income. If the government all of a sudden prohibits movement without any sort of support for small-scale rural farmers, how then do we expect them to survive in the next few weeks/months?

There is anecdotal commentary that small-scale farmers only contribute 10% towards overall meat production, while they own up to 45% of the livestock population. My counter-argument is that because of poor traceability, the government is unable to properly quantify the contribution of the small-scale sector toward meat production. Furthermore, speculators often drive into communal farming areas to buy cattle, either taking them directly to auctions or first improving their body condition (backgrounding) before actually sending the cattle to auctions, or directly to an approved abattoir. Such activities are unfortunately not recorded, and thus end up reflecting as if the cattle emanates from the commercial sector instead of a small-scale rural farmer.

The exemption provided by the government to allow slaughter for own use or own consumption, or for cultural or ritual purposes, might seem to others as if the government has been considerate to rural poor communities. However, if one reads the gazetted control measures, it is clear that the cow would have to be slaughtered on the premises where the animal was kept before slaughter, and only the meat can be transported. Again, this is an anti-poor policy decision, as it does not take into consideration that:

- From August to December there are various traditional or customary practices and celebrations, which includes lobola/weddings, unveiling of tombstones, and in some cultures they would have to slaughter a cow at the event. One then wonders what is stopping the government from providing the necessary protocols to monitor and assist with such events? Are we then saying that such events are less important, since the government is not willing to invest in resources to design and implement control protocols to allow movement of such animals? If such measures go beyond December, what will happen to those who rely on selling their cattle to pay for school fees?
- Even if the government does not have a centralised traceability system, some of the rural farmers have their own traceability system, which can clearly account for each cow from birth. With some being on their own land, which is clearly separated from others, why can such farmers not be helped with a specific protocol for them to send their cattle, still under Red Cross permit, to those who have linkages with approved abattoirs? Unfortunately, such farmers do not have big cattle numbers to send their cattle directly to the abattoirs, and have been reliant on those with constant supply to the abattoir.

There is no doubt that we are faced with a mammoth task in dealing with a disease which has a major socioeconomic impact on the country, but we cannot continue to implement control measures which are not considerate, and we need to look at other options, including clear unapologetic support to those who are negatively affected. I therefore argue that the final decision on gazetting such measures is not only the responsibility of the Minister of Agriculture, but also requires the Cabinet's Economic and Social clusters to thoroughly interrogate the implications and mitigating measures.

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