

A food system that kills

Swine flu is meat industry's latest plague

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Mexico is in the midst of a hellish repeat of Asia's bird flu experience, though on a more deadly scale. Once again, the official response from public authorities has come too late and bungled in cover-ups. And once again, the global meat industry is at the centre of the story, ramping up denials as the weight of evidence about its role grows. Just five years after the start of the H5N1 bird flu crisis, and after as many years of a global strategy against influenza pandemics coordinated by the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), the world is now reeling from a swine flu disaster. The global strategy has failed and needs to be replaced with a public health system that the public can trust.

What we know about the situation in Mexico is that, officially speaking, more than 150 people have died from a new strain of swine flu that is, in fact, a genetic cocktail of pig, bird and human influenza strains. It has evolved to a form that is easily spread from human to human and is capable of killing perfectly healthy people. We do not know where exactly this genetic recombination and evolution took place, but the obvious place to start looking is in the factory farms of Mexico and the US. [1]

Experts have been warning for years that the rise of large-scale factory farms in North America has created the perfect breeding grounds for the emergence and spread of new highly-virulent strains of influenza. "Because concentrated animal feeding operations tend to concentrate large numbers of animals close together, they facilitate rapid transmission and mixing of viruses," said scientists from the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) in 2006. [2] Three years earlier, Science Magazine warned that swine flu was on a new evolutionary "fast track" due to the increasing size of factory farms and the widespread use of vaccines in these operations. [3] It's the same story with bird flu. The crowded and unsanitary conditions of the farms make it possible for the virus to recombine and take on new forms very easily. Once this happens, the centralised nature of the industry ensures that the disease gets carried far and wide, whether by feces, feed, water or even the boots of workers. [4] Yet, according to the US Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), "no formal national surveillance system exists to determine what viruses are prevalent in the US swine population." [5] The same is true of Mexico.

Communities at the epicentre

Another thing we know about the swine flu outbreak in Mexico is that the community of La Gloria in the state of Veracruz was trying to get authorities to respond to a vicious outbreak of a strange respiratory disease affecting them over the past months. The residents are adamant that the disease

is linked to pollution from the big pig farm that was recently set up in the community by Granja Carroll, a subsidiary of the US company Smithfield Foods, the world's largest pork producer.

After countless efforts by the community to get the authorities to help — efforts which led to the arrest of several community leaders and death threats against people speaking out against the Smithfield operations — local health officials finally decided to investigate in late 2008. Tests revealed that more than 60 per cent of the community of 3,000 people were infected by a respiratory disease, but officials did not confirm what the disease was. Smithfield denied any connection with its operations. It was only on 27 April 2009, days after the federal government officially announced the swine flu epidemic, that information came out in the press revealing that the first case of swine flu diagnosed in the country was of a 4-year old boy from the community of La Gloria on April 2, 2009. Mexico's Minister of Health says a sample taken from the boy was the only sample taken from the community that Mexican officials retained and sent for laboratory testing, which later confirmed that it was swine flu. [6] This despite the fact that a private risk assessment firm in the US, Veratect, had notified regional officials from the WHO about the outbreaks of the powerful respiratory illness in La Gloria in early April 2009. [7]

On 4 April 2009, the Mexican daily *La Jornada* published an article on the struggle of the community of La Gloria, with a photo in which a young boy is holding a placard at a demonstration with a picture of a pig crossed out and the words "Danger: Carrolls Farm" written on it in Spanish. [8]

About influenza pandemics in general, we know that proximity of factory pig farms and factory poultry farms increases the risks of viral recombination and the emergence of new virulent flu strains. Pigs held near to chicken farms in Indonesia, for instance, are known to have high-levels of infection from H5N1, the deadly variant of bird flu. [9] Scientists from the NIH warn "that increasing the numbers of swine facilities adjacent to avian facilities could further promote the evolution of the next pandemic." [10]

While it has not been widely reported, the region around the community of La Gloria is also home to many large poultry farms. Recently, in September 2008, there was an outbreak of bird flu among poultry in the region. At the time, veterinary authorities assured the public that it was only a local incidence of a low-pathogenic strain affecting backyard birds. But we now know, thanks to a disclosure made by Marco Antonio Núñez López, the President of the Environmental Commission of the State of Veracruz, that there was also an avian flu outbreak on a factory farm about 50 kilometres from La Gloria owned by Mexico's largest poultry company, Granjas Bachoco, that was not revealed because of fears of what it might mean for Mexico's export markets. [11] It should be noted that a common ingredient in industrial animal feed is "poultry litter", which is a mixture of everything found on the floor of factory poultry farms: fecal matter, feathers, bedding, etc

Could there be a more ideal situation for the emergence of a pandemic influenza virus than a poor rural area, full of factory farms owned by transnational corporations who care nothing for the well-being of the local people? The residents of La Gloria have tried for years to resist the Smithfield farm. And they tried for months to get authorities to do something about the strange illness hitting their people. They were ignored. Their voices did not register a single blip on the radar of the WHO's global emerging disease surveillance system. Nor did the bird flu outbreaks in Veracruz trigger a response from the OIE's global disease alert system. News only broke out haphazardly from private sources. [12] This is what passes for global surveillance.

Corporate bias

It is not the first time and it will not be the last time that corporate farms conceal disease outbreaks and put people's lives at risk. It is the nature of their business. A couple of years ago in Romania, Smithfield refused to let local authorities enter its pig farms after residents complained of the stench coming from hundreds of dead corpses of pigs left rotting for days at the farms. "Our doctors have not had access to the American [company's] farms to effect routine inspections," said Csaba Daroczi, assistant director at the Timisoara Hygiene and Veterinary Authority. "Every time they tried, they were pushed away by the guards. Smithfield proposed that we sign an agreement that would oblige us to warn them three days before each inspection." [13] Eventually, it emerged that Smithfield had been concealing a major outbreak of classical swine fever on its Romanian farms. [14]

In Indonesia, where people are still dying from bird flu and where many health experts believe the next pandemic virus will emerge, authorities can still not enter large corporate farms without the permission of the company. [15] In Mexico, authorities deflected calls to investigate La Granja Carroll and accused the residents of La Gloria of spreading infection because "they use home remedies instead of going to the health centres to cure their flu." [16]

Factory farms are time-bombs for global disease epidemics. Yet, there are still no programmes in place to deal with them, not even programmes of independent disease surveillance. Nobody on high seems to care, and it's probably no coincidence that these farms tend to be located amongst the poorest communities, who suffer dearly to get the truth out. Worse still, so much of our food supply now comes from this bloated system that the main task of government food safety agencies now seems to be to calm fears and keep people eating. Smithfield is already on the financial brink and just last week was negotiating for China's largest agribusiness company, COFCO, to take it over. [17]

In the meantime, the pharmaceutical industry is making a killing from the crisis. The US government has already opened an emergency window in its authorisation system to allow antivirals like Tamiflu and Relaxin to be used more widely on flu sufferers than allowed. This is great news for Roche, Gilead and Glaxo SmithKline, who hold monopolies on the drugs. But even more importantly, a swathe of smaller vaccine producers like Biocryst and Novavax are seeing their share prices shoot through the roof. [18] Novavax is trying to convince both CDC and the Mexican government that it can come up with a swine flu vaccine in as little as 12 weeks if the testing rules remain relaxed.

Sea change needed

Clearly, the global system for dealing with health problems brought on by the transnational food industry is completely upside down. Its surveillance system is a bust, frontline public health and veterinarian services are in a shambles and authority has been handed over to the private sector, which has every interest in maintaining the status quo. Meanwhile, people are told to keep indoors and to keep their fingers crossed for Tamiflu or a new vaccine that they may or may not get access to. This is not a tolerable situation; action for a sea change is needed, now.

In the specific case of the swine flu epidemic in Mexico, change can start with an immediate, transparent and thorough independent investigation of corporate pig and poultry farms in Veracruz, across the country and throughout North America. The people of Mexico need to know the source of the problem so that they can take adequate measures to cut the epidemic off at its roots and to ensure that it does not reoccur.

At the international level, the expansion of factory farms has to stop and be put into reverse. They are the hotbeds for pandemics and will continue to be so as long as they exist. It is probably pointless to call for a complete shift in the WHO-led global strategy, since the experience with bird flu demonstrates that neither the WHO, nor the OIE, nor most governments are going to take a hard line on corporate farming. Once again, it is people who are going to have to take the lead and protect themselves. Across the world, there are thousands of communities fighting against factory farms. These communities are on the front lines of pandemic prevention. What we now need is to turn these local fights against factory farms into a global movement to abolish them.

But the swine flu disaster in Mexico is also about a larger public health problem. The threats to consumer safety that are an inherent part of the industrial food system are compounded by a global trend to completely privatise health care, which has destroyed the capacities of public systems to properly respond to crises, and by policies to encourage migration to mega-cities where sanitation and public health policies are woefully inadequate. (The outbreak of swine flu hit Mexico City, a metropolis of more than 20 million people, just as the government cut off water supplies for much of the city's population, particularly the poorest sections.) The fact that surveillance of disease outbreaks has to come from private consultancy firms, that governments and UN agencies can sit quiet on that information and that we have to depend on a handful of drug companies to produce half-tested but fully-patented relief for our suffering should tell us that things have gone too far. We need not only food but public health systems that truly have some public agenda and public accountability to them.

Going further

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See the GRAIN resources page on bird flu for the following articles (<http://www.grain.org/birdflu/>):

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<http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=35>

GRAIN, "Germ warfare - Livestock disease, public health and the military-industrial complex",
Seedling, January 2008, <http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=533>

GRAIN, "Viral times - The politics of emerging global animal diseases", *Seedling*, January 2008,
<http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=532>

GRAIN, "Bird flu: a bonanza for 'Big Chicken'", *Against the grain*, March 2007,
<http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=22> (also available in Bahasa Indonesia)

GRAIN, "The top-down global response to bird flu," *Against the grain*, April 2006
<http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=12>

GRAIN, "Fowl play: The poultry industry's central role in the bird flu crisis", GRAIN Briefing,
February 2006,
<http://www.grain.org/briefings/?id=194>

P.S.

* From GRAIN, April 2009:

<http://www.grain.org/articles/?id=48>

Footnotes

[1] The pig industry in Mexico, like its counterpart in the US, does not want the disease to be called "swine flu" on the grounds that it is being transmitted not from pigs but directly between people. (Their main concern, of course, is a pork market that is fast collapsing from the stigma.) And some Mexican officials, like the Governor of Veracruz, are telling the public that the virus came from China though there is no evidence to support this claim.

[2] Mary J. Gilchrist, Christina Greko, David B. Wallinga, George W. Beran, David G. Riley and Peter S. Thorne, "The Potential Role of CAFOs in Infectious Disease Epidemics and Antibiotic

Resistance," *Journal of Environmental Health Perspectives*, 14 November 2006.

[3] Bernice Wuethrich, "Chasing the Fickle Swine Flu", *Science*, Vol. 299, 2003.

[4] Pro-poor Livestock Policy Initiative, "Industrial Livestock Production and Global Health Risks," FAO, 2007:

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[5] CDC, April 21, 2009 / 58 (Dispatch);1-3:

<http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmw...>

[6] Andrés T. Morales, "Cerco sanitario en Perote, tras muerte en marzo de bebé por gripe porcina," *La Jornada*, 28 April 2009:

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Tracy Wilkinson and Cecilia Sánchez, "Mexico tries to focus on source of infection," *Los Angeles Times*, April 28, 2009.

[7] Dudley Althaus, "World's queries have no answers," *Houston Chronicle*, 27 April 2009.

[8] Andrés Timoteo, "Alerta epidemiológica en Perote por brote de males respiratorios," *La Jornada*, 4 April 2009.

[9] David Cyranoski, "Bird flu spreads among Java's pigs," *Nature* 435, 26 May 2005.

[10] Mary J. Gilchrist, Christina Greko, David B. Wallinga, George W. Beran, David G. Riley and Peter S. Thorne, "The Potential Role of CAFOs in Infectious Disease Epidemics and Antibiotic Resistance," *Journal of Environmental Health Perspectives*, 14 November 2006.

[11] Piden cerco sanitario ante epidemia, SPI/ElGolfo.Info, 24 April 2009:

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[12] Tom Philpott first broadcast the possible connection between the swine flu outbreak and the Smithfield operation in Veracruz from his US-based blog on 25 April 2009:

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[13] Mirel Bran: "Swine Plague: Romania Criticizes American Group's Attitude", *Le Monde*, 15 August 2007, translated by Leslie Thatcher (Truthout).

[14] GRAIN, "Viral times - The politics of emerging global animal diseases", *Seedling*, January 2008.

[15] See "Box 2. Bird flu in Indonesia and Vietnam" (by GRAIN) in Edward Hammond, "Indonesia fights to change WHO rules on flu vaccines," *Seedling*, April 2009:

<http://www.grain.org/seedling/?id=593>

[16] "Afectados por extraña enfermedad, 60% de pobladores de La Gloria," *La Jornada* 27 April 2009:

<http://www.lajornadasanluis.com.mx/...>

[17] "Is Smithfield on the market?", *Farming UK*, 26 April 2009.

[18] "Smaller drug firms gaining from swine flu," Reuters, 27 April 2009:

<http://www.reuters.com/article/pres...>