



How to stop Africa's rinderpest epidemic

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A deadly epidemic is currently devastating the cattle herds of Africa and threatens to spill over into other continents. Yet the vaccines that could wipe out this virulent disease, rinderpest, are ready at hand, and could be produced in abundance at minimal cost.

Rinderpest is a killer andcripler of cattle and goats and other split-hooved animals. Periodic waves of the disease wipe out or stunt most of the cattle in an endemic area. But in the 1960s, good vaccine became available. The use of these vaccines upon all animals in an area resulted in complete protection of vaccinated herds and the complete disappearance of the disease in susceptible breeds in areas with high levels of immunization. This was a perfect vaccine for the backward areas of the globe, since it was cheap, effective, and simple to administer, requiring merely the vaccination of as many animals as possible. This program permitted the disease to be completely eradicated from South America, East Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, the Middle East, and from almost the entire African continent. It was eliminated from North Africa, West Africa, South Africa, and basically from all of East Africa, except small remote areas of embattled Ethiopia. Because of turmoil and warfare, it was not possible to investigate and confirm the program's success in these areas; so the war against rinderpest was prematurely declared won.

Then a few years ago, rinderpest started reappearing. Reports of small outbreaks first came in Ethiopia, then in neighboring areas of turmoil, the refugee camps in Somalia, Southern Sudan, Uganda, etc. Rinderpest is as capable of reappearing rapidly as it was of disappearing rapidly. It spread like wildfire, because its years of quiescence had resulted in the end of vaccination throughout the world for several years, leaving the animal populations entirely susceptible.

Local government agencies were unable to cope, given the economic and political chaos in these areas. The disease in a very short time spread from the remote mountains of Ethiopia through much of Northwest, Central, and East Africa, possibly as far as South Africa's borderlands; it jumped

to the Middle East (Lebanon) and possibly into areas of Eastern Europe and Asia.

The spread has been largely unchecked and there is a dire need right now to put into effect all possible countermeasures. Rinderpest is a direct threat to all herdsmen in the Third World, and many lives are being endangered in the areas of chronic protein deficiency, where the curtailment of meat and milk supplies would be especially dangerous to young children and pregnant women. In many areas, the entire wealth of the nomads consists of their livestock.

However, the eradication program of the past can be reinstated and continued until the disease is entirely eliminated from the world, which could be in only a few years if steps are taken at once. The vaccine is easy to produce, and large quantities can be made available quickly.

This is a low cost, high-return program that the world must put into effect now. Every country must participate, since the disease threatens not only African peasants but also the livestock business in all the advanced agricultural areas of Western and Eastern Europe, as well as the Americas.

Rinderpest vaccine has been produced in Africa before, and its production should be increased to a maximum at once, for a quick and clean eradication of this disease. Rinderpest vaccine is very similar to measles vaccine, and any laboratories set up to manufacture rinderpest under a crash program can later utilize the personnel and facilities to make measles vaccines for children.

What happened to the laboratories and the personnel who previously manufactured this vaccine I do not know, but I hope that they can now be mobilized to manufacture rinderpest vaccine once again. Any knowledgeable animal-vaccine manufacturer could easily set up a plant to manufacture this simple vaccine in a few months with modern air transport of equipment and supplies, and then manufacture the full amount needed very quickly. It may require a subsidy of a few hundred thousand dollars because of the short time that is available, but if properly done, it will save hundreds of millions of dollars in livestock in an area in which livestock means life or death to the population. It also can utilize local professionals and technicians and teach them how to do these things for themselves. "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day; teach him to fish and he will eat for a lifetime."