



Trying hands at packaging poultry in urban Cameroon

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Summary:

The article highlights packaging as a new trend among small scale intensive poultry farmers in Cameroon. It argues that this trend is mediated by increase in small scale farmer populations hence poultry supplies in face of low corresponding demands, desperateness to sell poultry imposed by high medical and feeding costs for intensive fowls, the emergence of potential monopolies etc. It calls for farmer synergies as a necessary tool to moderating the shocks and stresses imposed by packaging such as high labour costs for farmers, time consumption and exclusion of farmers and workers from their families etc.

Recently the government of Cameroon put a ban on imported poultry related products.

This move was aimed at:

- Boosting domestic poultry production which will in time lead to sector employments and more accessible poultry markets especially in urban areas mediated by very high population densities, food demands etc as in most Sub-Saharan African countries.
- Reducing dependencies on foreign related poultry products so as to better the country's Balance of Payment deficits by spurring the country's Gross Domestic Product. Being a beneficiary of HIPC initiative, the government sought to fight poverty by creating arenas for business and employment in the poultry sector for more tax returns and curb unemployment and poverty.
- Stepping up protein bases as red meat scarcity was increasingly a problem in urban areas (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-CkTq_7TN1E) like Douala, Yaounde, and Limbe etc. The price of red meat reached a staggering 2,500 Francs CFA per Kilogram while the price of cattle ranged between 350,000 and 400,000 Francs CFA in 2008.

- Supplementing fish related products that have seen a drop in the past 10 years from 10000 to 5000 tonnes ([An Arrey Mbongaya Ivo film on threatened coastal livelihoods in the West Coast of Limbe](#)) due to a loss of artisan fishing families to other fields like farming and education, hunting and also unsustainable twin trawling which villagers along the West Coast of Limbe, Cameroon have linked to destruction of fishing nurseries by trawlers and the unsustainable harvesting of immature fish hence they face fish scarcity and get less from their efforts and the ocean cannot replenish itself naturally. Also 70% of artisan fishermen in Cameroon come from neighbouring countries and they send much of the catch back home and other commentators have argued that these fishermen do not care very much about depletion of the fish resources as they are not natural custodians of them.

With these conditions, the environment became convenient for small scale intensive poultry across Cameroon. However due to the emergence of many poultry farms, buyers of poultry can make better choices and impose conditionalities on how their products should be marketed to them. The most recent trend has been the demand for cleaning or packaging of fowls before delivery. The reasons given by buyers for this move include:

- The need for presentable products and ready products, especially as buyers (hotels and restaurants, road side chicken grillers etc) claim to have other time consuming business operations to attend hence tallying with assertions that urban livelihoods were complex and multi-disciplinary in nature (Hall and Midgley, 2004). Buyers also argued that they had many suppliers hence the advantage of choice hence

packaging poultry was an unavoidable route for poultry producers in order to gain competitive advantage.

- More so, Restaurants and Hotels see packaging as a way of reducing the number of staff in their kitchens hence of reducing costs. They argue that if poultry is packaged before delivery then there is no need to employ people to slaughter birds, take off their feathers and cook them. Worth noting, this author gathered from small scale poultry farmers in Limbe that Seme New Beach Hotel, Mars and Fini Hotel have recently demanded that the chicken they buy must be skinned and presented with its liver and stumps.

Therefore to supply poultry, small scale intensive farmers did not only have to grow birds but had to package them in order not to be displaced on the production line by willing other farmers. Packaging it most be noted varies and could mean skinning chicken, taking out its entrails and cutting its feet to placing it in big plastics. In some cases however only the removal of feathers will constitute packaging. Farmers who indulge in packaging have given the following reasons for this:

- The presentability of packaged products which is arguably understood by both farmers and poultry buyers. They hold that packaged poultry looks good and can easily attract buyers especially hotels and treats hence in a way constitutes for them, an invitation to treat.
- The desperateness of some small scale farmers who need to sell their grown fowls fast to reduce feeding and medical costs. Their costs are mediated by high prices for poultry medical care, concentrates and fowl feed that stood at 18,000Francs

CFA in the last quarter of 2008. Mature birds are thus dumped in the markets to reduce the cost of poor farmers.

- The need to compete with suppliers who had already embraced the idea of packaging or to deal with hotels and restaurants who impose packaging as a condition to treating with small scale poultry farmers especially when they find out that these farmers have very mature birds and thus most sell them to cut feeding and medical costs.

These issues have affected the fabric of small scale intensive poultry farming in the following ways:

- Birds are not readily sold on maturity as in the past. They are slaughtered, skinned and their entrails removed before being delivered to buyers.
- Some buyers even demand the liver and stumps (fowl feet) which were historically not given by sellers who attempted packaging some over 20 years ago by selling institutions like Victoria Club in Down Beach, Limbe.

African Centre for Community and Development in late 2008 and early 2009 caught with small scale intensive poultry farmers around Fako Division and in Isokolo and Ngeme particularly and documented the following points as the main consequences of packaging birds before delivery on their livelihoods outcomes:

- Firstly, packaging has led to increase labour time. Small scale farmers need to boil much water in huge pots which necessitates more wood fuel or gas in order to soak fowls and remove their feathers by hand in a slow and time consuming process. More wood fuel is a driver to over harvesting tropical woods around Mount Fako Forest (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TYKxG-WFSHE>) region

hence anti-conservation practices in the area (Arrey, 2008). Workers who are forced to work overtime also spend lesser time with children and families hence affecting the balance of a health family life.

- More so, costs have increased as they need to employ more people in order to deliver their products in time and in the right format. Some times they hire temporal labour in order to cut costs or they have to increase their workers wages to cover feeding of fowls, cleaning of the poultry house to packaging.
- Due to the high cost of inputs, many small scale intensive poultry farmers are drifting out of the trade creating a favourable groundwork for the emergence of monopolies. Monopolies might influence in the long run, the price of poultry products and likely cause hypes to maximise profits which is detrimental to food security in the country.
- Many potential small scale intensive poultry farmers are also driven to village poultry which is a tested and less expensive option especially in Cameroonian villages as it strives on very limited medical costs, infrastructure, low feeding cost since birds are generally raised extensively (Arrey, 2009)

Therefore packaging is powerful trend in Fako Division in particular and urban Cameroon in general. For this trend to be sustainable, the following tools must be put in place:

- An objective way of taxing or pricing packaged birds without shrinking small scale poultry systems. One way is to create synergies between farmers in order to impose a unique price for packaging a bird since all birds cannot cost the same due to the variances in sizes. Synergies will closely monitor buyers and curb their

propensity to manoeuvre economically. They will also protect sellers who are poor and likely to be affected negatively by high cost of packaging. One way is for these synergies to buy from small scale farmers when birds are mature and then resell to buyers even if packaged at prices favourable to synergies.

- Small scale intensive farmers can form partnerships to purchase small effective and cost efficient packaging machines. The government can subsidize these purchases for farmers working under umbrella organizations. These organisations can also receive payments from the public for packaging services to sustain themselves and manage their machines.
- There is also the need to monitor markets in poultry products and also bring buyers and sellers on a platform to design best business practices and to understand market trends. These will institutionalize learning as a business tool in the sector. Governments, urban councils plus the private sector must thus put food security, sustaining small scale intensive poultry farming and the people in focus when designing policies and interventions for the poultry sector, economic growth and food security in Cameroon. One way is to make a friendly tax system and to subsidize medical care for poultry and create devices to oversee reduction in the prices of concentrates and fowl feed. The latter will encourage new users; step up profitability in the sector and better producer resilience to the shocks and stresses imposed by high demands for packaging or high costs of inputs. Encouraging village poultry will also enhance competition as it strives on low inputs hence could be a tool to moderate the high prices of intensive poultry farming.

Therefore packaging is recurrent feature in the poultry sector in Cameroon. The thrust of this paper has not been to discredit its advantages but to highlight its implications on small scale intensive poultry farming so as to understand the difficulties of farmers. The paper sees packaging as beyond its limitations complained by farmers if it is done sustainably. Sustainable packaging will put small scale farmers, food security and the people in focus in business, development designs and implementation processes. This advocates for responsible business and consumers' protection especially as evidence shows that both farmers and buyers generally think packaging is more presentable. Presentability should however not mask the state of poultry farmers and the Cameroonian economy nor should the economy overlook packaging as a necessary route towards industrialisation which many argue must be the best route for Sub-Saharan Africa if ever she is to overcome poverty and underdevelopment. Trying hands at packaging poultry in Cameroon is thus innovative but it should sustain itself objectively as well the poultry sector that generates it to be an effective livelihoods option in the country.



Poultry being skinned in Isokolo, Cameroon. Picture above is courtesy of Arrey Mbongaya Ivo.

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Poultry packaged on demand from hotels in Isokolo, Cameroon. Picture is courtesy of Arrey Mbongaya Ivo. ©2009 Arrey Mbongaya Ivo. All rights reserved.



Farmers Peter and Esome spend more time on fowls now because they must slaughter, clean etc before delivery. They sometimes have to hire more people to be on time hence support more costs for their efforts. Picture is courtesy of Arrey Mbongaya Ivo. ©2009 Arrey Mbongaya Ivo. All rights reserved.

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