

Background Paper

3.2 d ii Global animal health communication strategy to support prevention and control of H5N1 HPAI

**FAO/OIE International Animal Health Communicators' Roundtable
in support of the FAO/OIE Global Strategy for the Prevention and Control of HPAI
April 16 – 19, 2007, Rome**

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Summary of key recommendations

Multi-disciplinary experts attending a four-day FAO/OIE international animal health communicator's roundtable in Rome agreed to develop a global animal health communication strategy to support the FAO/OIE Global Strategy for Prevention and Control of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza H5N1. The 45 participants from 14 countries included representatives from governments, technical/UN agencies (FAO, OIE, WHO, UNICEF and UNSIC), donor agencies (USDA, USAID, WB, EC), private sector and academia. The expert practitioners included epidemiologists, socio-economists, communication specialists, veterinarians and program managers.

The purpose of the meeting was to define the contribution of communication as a process in the response to the on-going threat of the highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 virus, and in stopping its spread at source in poultry.

The meeting recognized the need for communication strategies to be embedded in a framework, which adheres to the principles of inclusion, participation and self-determination. Effective communication values local knowledge and socio-cultural norms, and at the same time strengthens capacities of all key actors and stakeholders through the provision of relevant technical information and tools. In this way, the response to animal diseases can be understood, contextualized and, acted upon at all levels.

The meeting acknowledged the need for a comprehensive communication strategy, which is integral to a coherent response to major zoonotic disease outbreaks such as highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1. It identified that communication professionals brought specialized skills to augment and improve the effectiveness of the technical aspects of the prevention, preparedness, response, and recovery phases of animal disease occurrences. Additionally, and most importantly, the experts recognized that communication strategies adopted for highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 would be applicable to other emerging and re-emerging animal diseases. In developing such a global strategic communication framework and plan of action to support the prevention and control of HPAI H5N1, the recommendations of the meeting included the need to:

1. Advocate the importance of the process of communication, and the need for enhanced capacity-building in the area of animal health communication, as critical elements in addressing and managing animal health issues
2. Ensure that strategic communication is integrated into the veterinary infrastructure and policy response at country level, and to gain international support for this where required
3. Establish an international network of animal health communication experts dealing with this disease to work in cooperation with animal health experts, as well as with other relevant partners
4. Develop a comprehensive communication action plan to address the animal health aspects of highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1 transmission, including the creation of

communication tools for immediate use and longer-term strategies to sustain positive social and behavioral change

5. Ensure consistency in messaging and accuracy of technical information which is adaptable to local contexts, and
6. Develop a multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary approach to communication that engages all relevant stakeholders in a participatory and inclusive process.

At the meeting, representatives from countries infected/affected by HPAI H5N1 strongly recommended that all external aid and technical agencies must fully coordinate their strategic communication thinking, plans and activities before offering assistance to countries. Furthermore, they also endorsed the view that FAO and OIE need to play a strong leadership role in animal health communication.

While significant work is being done with regard to animal health communication, several gaps and challenges have been identified (see ANNEXE), particularly in the context of avian influenza H5N1, which need to be addressed as part of the strategy and a global plan for action.

The experts concluded by recognizing the urgent need to strengthen communication capacity and the role of communication professionals in the process of supporting responses to emerging animal diseases, particularly those that pose a risk to human health, and especially highly pathogenic avian influenza H5N1.

Key issues, challenges and strategic options

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), with support from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), organized an **International Animal Health Communicators' Roundtable**, in Rome on 16-19 April 2007. The purpose of the roundtable was to develop recommendations to enhance multilateral coordination of communication and public awareness initiatives that support the *FAO/OIE Global Strategy for the Prevention and Control of HPAI*. Participants at the meeting included communication specialists and subject matter experts from multilateral organizations and government agencies. At the roundtable, experiences were shared on key issues, challenges and gaps in communications/public awareness initiatives aimed at combating HPAI; recommendations were developed and prioritized to sustain a coordinated communications agenda; and consensus was built on the need for effective mechanisms to strengthen inter-agency cooperation.

Background and Context

There is global agreement among all partners that stopping the highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) H5N1 virus "at source" (i.e., among poultry) is critical in order to minimize the impact on agriculture and to prevent the emergence of a human pandemic. However, to date, the overwhelming majority of the communication interventions and discourse has been biased towards the issue of human rather than animal health. Much of this has been in the nature of an emergency response, led by outbreak and risk communication from a human health perspective, directed at the latter stages of the animal-to-human transmission, rather than the earlier stages of the poultry-to-poultry transmission. While these public health driven communication interventions may help prevent animal-to-human transmission of the virus, and perhaps human-to-human transmission in the future, they have done little to help prevent the spread of the virus through biomechanical transportation and animal-to-animal transmission, as evidenced by the growing endemicity and spread of the virus in poultry in many countries and regions.

The global numbers of human cases has been relatively small -- 309 cases with 188 deaths between late 2003 and June 2007¹. However, the control and containment measures implemented to reduce transmission have caused massive disruption and impact on rural lives and livelihoods, as well as national economies and international trade. Combined losses to GDPs are estimated at USD 10-15 billion. Furthermore, aside from successes in stopping the disease in some countries, the virus continues to spread and infect poultry (and thus pose an ever-increasing risk to people's livelihoods and human health) in more and more countries, across several continents.

In the context of HPAI H5N1, there is a very complex interrelationship between epidemiology, farming systems and individual behavior. Emerging data clearly suggests, that where the virus load has been show to be highest, the number of human cases is high -- indicating the need to prevent infection in animals. Conversely, wherever the outbreaks in poultry has declined, so have the number of human cases. Spread is mainly due to internal and international trade (globalization of trade), with illegal/unregulated trade responsible for most of this form of spread. The trade in exotic wild birds also cannot be underestimated. In Asia, the mixing of species in live bird markets and the proximity between (pet) birds and people are an important source of virus transmission. In Africa, new studies seem to indicate that free-range ducks are responsible for the persistence of the virus.

With nearly 300 million birds dead or destroyed and growing calls for large-scale re-structuring of poultry farming and trading practices, millions of the already poor or those living on the edge of poverty, and whose livelihoods are intrinsically linked to poultry rearing, face an uncertain future. When demand and prices crash, the livelihoods of people suffer. HPAI has a number of major consequences for international trade: volumes drop; prices become volatile (outbreaks in one part of the world influences prices elsewhere); there are shifts in location of poultry exports; national poultry markets experience shocks (due to consumer perception of risk, even when no

¹ WHO figures as of 4 June 2007.

outbreaks may have occurred in the country). Experience has shown, that in many countries, there is a dual effect on demand when outbreaks are announced -- an immediate drop, as well as a long-term drop in demand when many consumers decide not to eat chicken any more even after the situation calms down. Many consumers erroneously believe avian influenza is a food-related risk not an animal-related risk. The continuing dissemination of inaccurate information through the media increases public perception of risk and thus exacerbates market shock.

Furthermore, there is a mistaken interpretation in policy domains, that focusing attention on control measures in the poultry sector, including vaccination, reflects an emphasis on the agriculture sector and the prevention of economic losses, rather than protecting the public from a potential pandemic. Therefore, there is an urgent need to develop a clear communication and advocacy strategy explaining how eliminating infection in poultry reduces the risk of a potential pandemic. There is also an urgent need to rethink and expand upon the current avian influenza communication discourse based on a deeper understanding of the impact and nature of the interaction between the current disease control measures, geopolitics, livelihoods, markets and socio-cultural practices. Communication approaches that foster stakeholder dialogue, public participation and community empowerment need to be brought to bear on the current prevention and control measures to stop the disease "at source" and prevent a human pandemic from emerging.

Main Communication Challenges and Emerging Lessons

Given the 'emergency' nature of the national responses in most countries, and a lack of baseline data, it is difficult to assess the effectiveness and impact of communication interventions to date. However, a broad analysis of national communication plans, mission reports, epidemiological trends and the few specific communication studies that have been conducted, reveals that the global communication response has been less than optimal in preventing the spread of the virus in poultry.

Creation of an environment which supports and facilitates the effective implementation of the FAO/OIE Global Strategy for the Progressive Control of Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) calls for the development and roll-out of robust and strategic communication campaigns at global, regional, national, and sub-national levels. To stop avian influenza "at source", communication plans and strategies must build on 12 key lessons that are emerging from the field:

1. In most national plans, the technical/medical/veterinary operations are described in detail, but less attention has been given to strategies for enhancing public understanding and engagement in the national avian influenza response.
2. National communication plans largely consist of outbreak/crisis responses to the potential emergence of a pandemic, and generally do not address animal health issues, deep-rooted socio-cultural practices, implications for rural livelihoods, or the longer-term socio-economic impact on the poultry sector.
3. Focus has tended to be on *Do and Don't* messages disseminated through mass media and print. While this may be acceptable as an immediate crisis response, it is inadequate for increasing continuous public participation and engagement.
4. Much effort and many resources are being spent on developing and refining key pandemic preparedness messages, but disproportionately fewer resources on developing, establishing and strengthening sustainable outreach mechanisms and strategies to effectively deliver prevention messages to those who need them most.
5. Factors that strongly influence public response – such as information on the modes of virus transmission and prevention methods; the reasoning behind particular control measures; adequate and timely compensation; re-stocking policies; and the ending of emergency phases – have often not been clearly and consistently communicated.

6. Surprisingly few country plans call for Knowledge, Attitude, Practices and Behavior (KAPB) or risk perception studies to be done prior to the rollout of communication campaigns, with the result that 'messaging' continues to remain largely generic in nature and is often not adapted to real-life situations.
7. Emerging evidence suggests that while most people in affected countries have heard of avian influenza, confusion still exists about its transmissibility, and means of prevention. Additionally, the perception of risk among affected populations and stakeholders drops rapidly after the initial outbreak is over.
8. Mechanisms to engage and establish partnerships with the media, the commercial/private sector, small-scale poultry producers' associations, as well as civil society, have remained weak. News reporting has often tended to be sensational, confusing and inaccurate – fueling rumours and loss of public trust and confidence in national authorities. This has generally precipitated large-scale negative consumer reaction and poultry market shocks/disruptions.
9. Resource allocations for communication planning (staff, funds and time) have been less than optimal, and thus, in the event of an outbreak, policy and decision-making within national governments still seem to be reactive, focused mainly on the potential for a pandemic, and driven largely by political expediency.
10. There is an urgent need for the systematic sharing/management of knowledge and information on HPAI communication interventions. A comprehensive and multi-disciplinary meta-analysis of the HPAI communication interventions to date, and their effectiveness, needs to be conducted on a priority basis. Findings from this meta-analysis should form an authoritative basis for the design of communication strategies and interventions, with strong theoretical and empirical underpinnings.
11. A unified approach to rapidly building/strengthening national communication capacities, backed up by the establishment of decentralized resource centers, needs to be developed for providing on-going, hands-on technical assistance in avian influenza communication.
12. There is a need to establish indicators, baselines and benchmarks, and to assess progress and the contribution of communications to the prevention and control of avian influenza.

The FAO/OIE Strategic Communication Framework for Action

Building on these emerging lessons, and towards developing a global strategic communication framework and plan of action to support the prevention and control of HPAI H5N1, the experts agreed on setting the following as overarching communication goals:

- Generate a clear understanding on the part of high-level decision makers that it is by preventing and controlling virus spread in poultry that one has the best opportunity to prevent human infections and the potential development of a pandemic strain.
- Instill a sense of urgency within policy domains to ensure full preparedness and strengthened communication capacities among Ministries of Agriculture/Livestock and at all levels, for the rapid rollout of response interventions in the short as well as long term, including the mobilization of adequate resources.
- Catalyze greater societal ownership and public participation in regional/national avian influenza responses, including the wide-scale adoption of safe poultry practices and preventive behaviors, to reduce the risk of virus transmission and spread.
- Protect livelihoods and mitigate poultry market shocks and negative consumer reactions, as well as minimize market recovery time following any announcements of avian influenza outbreaks in poultry in a sub-region or individual countries.

In line with the communication goals outlined above, five streams of work broadly define the role of animal health communication constituency in support of the FAO/OIE Global Strategy:

1. Technical Assistance and Capacity Building in Communication Planning

Through a consensus-building process, develop an evidence-based global strategic communication framework and plan of action in support of the FAO/OIE Global Strategy for HPAI Prevention and Control. Provide technical assistance and guidance to countries (MoAs) in communication planning and message design/delivery through the conduct of rapid assessments, communication training/planning workshops, and the provision of experts and appropriate tools. Establish mechanisms to monitor progress, and a network of animal health communication specialists to provide hands-on technical assistance to Ministries of Agriculture/Livestock. Develop and disseminate tested communication tools and guides to support training, communication planning, and message design for HPAI prevention and control to all MoAs and key partners.

2. Strategic Information for Policy Development and Advocacy

Systematically collate, produce and disseminate strategic information on animal health issues generated by technical groups and partners to inform policy/strategy development, decision-making and advocacy, at global and national levels. This would include the conduct of meta-analyses to fill strategic information gaps and identify best practices in animal health communication. Additionally, there is urgent need to strengthen alliances with national and international journalists for quality reporting and keeping animal health issues high on national/international policy agendas.

3. Public Information and Donor/Media Advocacy

Develop, produce and disseminate accurate, useful and timely public information on the prevention and control of HPAI, and ensure due recognition of the strategic role of animal health communication in HPAI prevention/control among the general public, key partners, donor agencies, policy-makers, and the media

4. Partnership-building and Coordination

Establish strategic mechanisms at global and regional levels, such as a technical advisory group on communication and an international network of animal health communicators, to develop and promote a comprehensive and effective global framework for local, national and regional communication responses to the HPAI epizootic. Improve coordination and harmonize plans and activities with UN partners, key NGOs, the private sector, donors and government agencies.

5. Strengthening Capacities of Animal Health Communicators

Establish a mechanism for continuously strengthening professional competencies of partners and the newly established International Network for Communication and Animal Health (INCAH) to respond effectively and comprehensively to the evolving HPAI crisis.

It is understood, that besides specific socio-cultural and socio-economic contexts, the communication needs of countries will also be defined by whether they are uninfected, have been recently infected (with on-going sporadic outbreaks), or have become endemic.