



Bird flu a 'marker' for the future

No room for neglect of animal disease, says top UN official

Rome, 6 October – Avian influenza is a 'marker' of what can happen if insufficient attention is paid to animal health, especially when disease leaps the boundary between animals and humans, according to the U.N. system coordinator for influenza, David Nabarro.

Speaking at a meeting of FAO's avian influenza donors, he said many animal diseases that have attacked human beings in recent years (like severe acute respiratory syndrome, SARS, or human immunodeficiency virus, HIV) could have been avoided had more emphasis been put on stronger animal health and greater human security.

"Why do we spend so much defending ourselves against terrorism or natural disasters, but so little in defending ourselves from animal disease," he asked, calling for greater political commitment and understanding that the "bugs in the animal kingdom" represent the major threat to human life.

If we are to change the situation, he stressed, there is a major role for communications to play as a mobilising force, involving all stakeholders, particularly those directly involved in animal production and trading.

In the case of bird flu, the vast majority of these are the poor, and most often women and children because both are largely responsible for looking after poultry.

"We have to engage them (the poor) in the struggle, they have to be our partners" in the global fight to control and prevent avian influenza, said Nabarro. "From the backyard poultry keepers down to the market traders, all have to be involved."

"They have to feel that they'll be given compensation for lost birds, that they'll get a sympathetic ear from the government, and that their poultry holdings, however small or large, will be resupplied with healthy birds."

Communication strategies have to address the hundreds of thousands of people worldwide involved in livestock production because most of them lack the knowledge they need to protect themselves and ensure disease-free stock.

But, noted Nabarro, communication must also address the highest levels of strategy formulation and policy-making. Communication is needed to "create the climate" that is necessary for changing the current state of ignorance surrounding animal health and animal disease.

He argued that FAO is uniquely placed to influence policy through strategic communication that draws on the marriage between veterinary science and socio-economic expertise.