



Credit: FAO/S. Sarkar

Community radio station in Sierra Leone

THE ISSUE

Reducing risks and threats of a global nature, calls for strategically re-thinking current communication and advocacy practices. Health threats emerging today are complex, interconnected, and potentially large-scale phenomena which need to be addressed through cohesive, evidence-based strategies. Recent experience has shown that communication strategies can play a crucial role in ensuring public participation and engagement in disease prevention, detection, and control interventions.

Previously, risk communication focused on outbreak, or crisis response and the individual's risk perception and ability to make rational decisions. More recent communication strategies have focused on communities and the complex social, political, and cultural environment in which they live. Within a

society, health scientists may formulate and describe risk in specific ways, while decision-makers and the media may frame risk messages for public consumption in other ways, and the lay public may perceive risk in an entirely different way. Effective communication can bridge these gaps and create a common and shared understanding of the issues – a key step towards forging informed solutions that minimise the impact on livelihoods, particularly for the agricultural sector (often, the barriers to changing behaviour, practices, and policies have more to do with the lack of options and economic means, than the willingness to change).

The world is facing significant challenges to food production, health and the environment which will necessitate clear, consistent and cohesive communication strategies to examine public issues, build consensus and engage communities in addressing our common needs.

THE FACTS

Between 2007 and 2050, the world population is expected to rise from 6.2 billion to 9.2 billion. In 2008, for the first time in history, the global urban population equalled the rural population. By 2050, the global urban population is expected to be approximately 6.4 billion, with 70 percent of humanity living in vast urban agglomerates. By 2025 there will be 27 mega-cities around the world, of which 21 will be in developing countries and the majority with a population of more than 15 million each.

Growth in population, combined with rising incomes, is expected to drive an increasing demand for protein of animal origin. In 2008, over 21 billion animals were raised for food. By 2020, the demand is estimated to grow by 50 percent. This will accelerate the intensification of animal production, including a dramatic rise in peri-urban production sites. The concentration of animal and human populations co-existing around urban sites will increase the likelihood of major outbreaks of infectious diseases at the animal-human interface. Furthermore, the enormous concentration of animals will challenge waste disposal capacity, as most countries lack regulations or capacity for proper animal waste disposal. An estimated 140 million metric tons of poultry litter and 460 million metric tons of swine waste were produced worldwide in 2003, and pathogens can survive for months in such wastes.

The concentration and intensification of animal production will place increased demands on land, water, and the environment, with further encroachments into wildlife habitats and ecosystems, creating instabilities that can lead to the emergence of new pathogens.

Recent successes in responding to global disease threats including severe acute respiratory syndrome, H5N1 Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza, and pandemic A(H1N1) 2009 influenza have clearly demonstrated the power and importance of good risk communication strategies. Communication is most effective when mass media-focused crisis and risk communication approaches are linked with communication for social, behavioural and policy change.

CHALLENGES AND GAPS

The emergence and spread of disease is frequently mediated through human actions and behaviour. This includes actions and behaviours of livestock producers, marketers, traders, hunters and consumers, as well as national and international policy-makers. Most national response plans tend to have technical operations described in great detail, and significantly less attention given to strategies for enhancing public understanding and engagement in national or local response. This raises a number of critical questions, the answers to which will determine future risk reduction actions:

- ▶ Why do some issues resonate with political elites and communities, while others don't?
- ▶ Have the lessons and experiences to date been critically analysed and synthesised to gain genuine insight into stakeholder motivations for engaging in the reduction of risk?
- ▶ Are current health communication models adequate to deal with a One Health approach?
- ▶ How do we balance the need for long-term and wide-scale social change processes with targeted interventions of an emergency nature?
- ▶ Do national authorities, especially agriculture services, have sufficient communication capacities to deal with emerging infectious and transboundary animal diseases in the short and long term?

FAO'S POSITION

Communication specialists and practitioners need to work together across institutions and disciplines (media relations, crisis communication, behaviour change communication, advocacy, social mobilisation, participatory communication, etc.), and broaden their focus to the core communication principles of *participation, dialogue and empowerment*.

There is also an urgent need for a multi-disciplinary, technical advisory group that provides global leadership, coordination, and oversight for the analysis of emerging trends and the development of cohesive evidence-based communication guidance, in line with the *One Health* approach.



Community Forum on HPAI in Cambodia

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ Ministries of Agriculture/Livestock should systematically strengthen their institutional capacity in communication.
- ▶ In line with international consensus and the One Health approach, national governments should actively promote and invest in cross-sectoral collaboration and interventions.
- ▶ The international technical agencies should be tasked to develop tools, programmes and a systematic pathway for building core risk communication capacities in countries.
- ▶ Continuous promotion of appropriate biosecurity and community-based reporting of suspect events as a professional and societal norm should be made a priority along entire supply chains.

References and Resources:

- *Bridging the Gap:*
www.fao.org/docs/eims/upload//241483/ai301e00.pdf
- *Animal health and production information resources:*
www.fao.org/avianflu/en/inforesources.html

ECTAD Emergency Centre
for Transboundary Animal Diseases

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