

Background Paper

3.2d i Role of Communication in Avian/Pandemic Influenza Programme Ketan Chitnis & Osman Mansoor, UNICEF

Summary

The importance of communication to achieve programme goals is widely understood. The challenge of communication for behaviour change is the complex nature of human behaviour. Information is usually not sufficient on its own to achieve behaviour change, but communities need to be engaged in a dialogue as well. Cultural and socioeconomic issues can also impede change. For example, it is difficult to encourage reporting of sick birds when this leads to economic hardship and promotion of hand-washing when access to water and soap is not assured.

Since 2006, UNICEF has mobilised on its traditional strengths in behaviour change communication and social mobilization to support the UN response to the pandemic threat, under the technical leadership of WHO and FAO to help control highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in birds and prevent human H5N1 infections. With its extensive field presence in over 140 countries, UNICEF has been providing support to national governments to develop and implement communication strategies by developing alliances, creating tools and working with counterparts. Efforts by UNICEF globally have been catalyzed by two grants from Japan and one from Canada, and individual countries have been funded by several bi-lateral donors.

A key lesson learned is that all stakeholders under the lead of the technical agencies need to enhance its cooperation and identify those priority behaviours that are absolutely critical for prevention and control of avian influenza. At the same time, these behaviours must be feasible and appropriate for change through communication strategies, and need to be informed by ongoing dialogue with communities. A major achievement for avian influenza communication has been that despite competing national priorities, most affected countries created inter-sectoral partnerships including a national inter-agency communication taskforce and advocated with ministries to develop and implement communication plans. Preliminary research in affected countries indicates that knowledge and awareness of AI is high in the general population and in high-risk groups. However, risk perceptions of the threat posed by AI are low and individuals and communities continue to practice unsafe behaviours. Additionally, behaviour change is difficult to achieve in resource-poor settings due to socio-economic hardships and competing priorities.

A critical challenge for communication is the ongoing confusion between two very distinct issues: avian influenza and a pandemic. The connection between avian and pandemic flu is that the H5N1 virus that is currently causing highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in birds (and the rare human infection) could change and become a human virus causing a pandemic. Controlling H5N1 reduces the risk of a pandemic emerging as a result of a new virus, but in general, the response needed is very different for AI compared to PI, though there are some overlaps (e.g., hand hygiene). Recent discussions with technical partners have underscored the fact that controlling avian influenza requires particular attention to animal health communication issues, which should be a priority in the coming months. While at the same time pandemic preparedness plans and communication strategies need to be kept ready for rapid implementation.

Communication experts need timely guidance from their technical counterparts who need to work closely with communicators on determining the behavioural changes that will have the greatest impact on controlling and minimizing the threat of avian and pandemic influenza. Reality checks are needed, however, not all solutions are feasible given the socio-economic, political and cultural context within which communities live. Both technical experts and communicators need to be mindful of building upon local practices and integrating new behaviours with culturally relevant practices.

Outbreak and Behaviour Change Communication

The behaviour of individuals and communities has a direct impact on the success of any public health strategy. For the AI strategy to be effective, people's actions should reduce the risk that animals become infected, and that humans become infected as a result of handling animals. Such risk-reducing actions often require changes in people's habitual behaviour – changes that will only come about if they are understood, feasible and seen to be worth the effort. Policies and systems such as incentives for reporting, compensation for culling poultry, functioning surveillance systems and availability of veterinary services are vital for before communication can be successful.

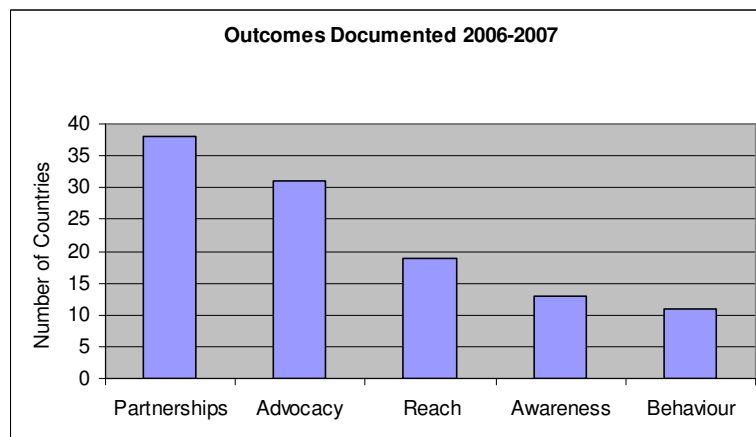
The AI strategy necessitates two types of communication response – (1) outbreak/risk communication that focuses on how authorities responsible for animal and human health assist in mobilizing the media and other channels to provide communities with timely and accurate information, and (2) behaviour change communication that focuses on how individuals, communities and institutions can reduce risks through changed or modified behaviour. Advocacy with national and sub-national government counterparts underpins the success of behaviour change and outbreak communication, as both strategies remain the responsibility of the government authorities.

Since late 2005 governments, with support from UN agencies and bi-lateral agencies, have been building local capacity around AI communication. A major step forward, driven by the communicators need to define key behaviours to focus on, was the March 2006 WHO, FAO, and UNICEF meeting. Four behaviours were prioritized for AI control: *Report, Cook, Separate, Wash*. Most governments, especially in Asia, Central Europe and parts of Africa are developing strategies that reinforce these behaviours and communicating with the public with varying levels of efficiency. In

December 2006, WHO and UNICEF developed suggested behaviours for pandemic preparedness (Flu-WISE) and pandemic recovery (Flu-CARE) that individuals would need to engage in to protect themselves and their families and community. Governments are now being encouraged to focus their communication strategies on these behavioural outcomes in the eventuality of an influenza pandemic.

Achievements of Avian Influenza Communication

- Considerable progress has been made in developing national communication strategies and plans and in ensuring that at least 70% of the people in affected countries (over 90% in some countries like Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand) are aware of AI and know how to reduce risks.
- In 2006-2007, most countries created inter-sectoral partnerships including a national inter-agency communication taskforce and advocated with ministries to develop and implement communication plans (see graph below). This was achieved even in regions where AI outbreaks have not occurred, such as in Latin America and the Caribbean and Eastern and Southern Africa.
- Countries are also beginning to document evidence on communities effectively reached with AI information, individuals that know the key preventive behaviours and those people adopting preventive practices, as demonstrated by the reach, awareness and behaviours columns in the graph below.



- In over 20 countries where knowledge, attitude and practice (KAP) surveys were conducted in 2006 and 2007, it was found that knowledge and awareness of AI is high in the general population and in high-risk groups. However, people continue to practice high risk behaviours when handling poultry as their perception of risks due to AI is quite low. In many instances, people also reported not practicing preventive behaviours due to lack of resources, difficult living conditions and deep-rooted cultural practices.
- Data point that communication promoting desired behaviours to control avian influenza are dependent on factors such as compensation policies, surveillance systems and veterinary and animal health infrastructure. For instance, a 2007 survey from Cambodia revealed that some 60% of the rural households have experienced AI outbreak in poultry, of which only 15% reported it to the authorities and almost none of the households affected expected any compensation from the government. Similar perceptions are reflected in other

countries as well which reinforce the need to strengthen surveillance systems and better enforcement of compensation policies.

- Communication dealing with the intersection of animal and health requires a specialized approach and increased capacity. To address this urgent need, an inter-agency communication planning toolkit for A/PI is being finalized to support governments in preparing and sharing national communication response plans.

Challenges and Constraints of Avian Influenza Communication

- Intensified and targeted communication is required to support technical strategies that ensure animal to animal transmission is controlled and prevented through knowledge and practice of adequate bio-security practices that are realistic and feasible within the specific socio-economic and cultural context.
- Backyard poultry farmers and wet market workers, both high risk groups, often have limited access to timely information. Research in Burkina Faso and Nigeria revealed that there is a particular need to identify specific AI communication strategies that reach the hard-to-reach with credible information on a regular basis and promote realistic behaviours grounded in the local context. Behavioural actions such as “keeping children away from chicken” or “separate birds from humans” are not feasible in many countries.
- The absence of the H5N1 virus in a country or region does not justify complacency or immunity to getting the virus. Communication plans should therefore be proactive in preparing necessary strategies and materials, and in training media and communicators particularly to reach vulnerable groups such as poultry farmers and handlers, food preparers and transporters, in the event of an outbreak.
- Successful implementation and evaluation of communication strategies demand expertise, adequate funding and sufficient time. For communication to be effective and to help communities and families to be prepared, sustained investments in capacity building of partners and counterparts will be required.

Lessons Learned from Avian Influenza Communication

- Considerable progress has been made in reaching out, raising awareness and improving knowledge of AI despite competing health and national emergency priorities. Desired changes in behaviours will require a longer time and an enabling environment (functioning compensation policy, means to improve bio-security, etc).
- There is an urgent need to build the capacity of national counterparts to plan and implement communication strategies to deal with and respond to public health crises such as AI; and to understand that communication involves dialogue with communities, and not just sending out messages.
- Country programmes need to invest much more in conducting research that allows feedback from the communities to inform the A/PI control and prevention strategy and to ensure that the behaviours promoted are feasible for people to act upon.
- AI communication strategies particularly in East Asia and Central Asia/Europe were implemented under an emergency-response mode beginning in 2005,

country governments are now investing in evidence-based planning and implementation to inform future interventions based on community participation and local realities.

- The substantial economic impact of AI outbreaks needs to be addressed through advocacy with governments and closely working with the poultry industry.
- Communication strategies need to strike an appropriate balance between behaviour change that puts the onus on individuals and that which promotes collective action to control AI and to prevent a potential pandemic.
- AI communication strategies need to strengthen ways to manage, mitigate and control the emergence of H5N1 in birds. To do so, agencies spearheading communication and social mobilization and the technical agencies need to strengthen their partnership to ensure sound technical guidance underpins behaviour change strategies. Within this context, there is a need to revisit the four priority behaviours – report, wash, separate and cook – and identify critical behaviours required to stop the transmission at source i.e. in birds.
- An inter-agency communication response for AI with buy-in from several ministries and technical experts on a health issue which is still evolving requires time and can be challenging. Discussion and agreement is required to determine appropriate agencies and partners to take the lead on outbreak, risk and social mobilization/behaviour change communication for avian and pandemic influenza.