



Nurturing a Social Network to Respond to Avian Influenza Outbreaks: AI-BCC and the Lao Women's Union

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INTRODUCTION

It was late 2005 and outbreaks of avian influenza (AI) were regular occurrences in Southeast Asia, leading to the deaths of nearly 140 million domestic poultry and 57 people—and fueling daily headlines in the region and worldwide. International health authorities rubbed their temples and wondered whether the culprit, the H5N1 virus, would evolve into a global influenza pandemic. In Lao PDR, which had suffered 43 outbreaks in commercial and backyard poultry farms in 2004, government officials warily monitored outbreaks in the countries surrounding them and wondered when the virus would return.

During the 2004 outbreak, some of the small-scale poultry farmers lost their entire flocks, affecting their livelihoods and resulting in widespread confusion about how a poultry disease could kill chickens so quickly. In Lao PDR, approximately 80 percent of all poultry are raised in small backyard farms, with the remainder in small commercial enterprises. In poorer households, poultry may be the only livestock raised and the main source of family protein.

It was these small, backyard poultry farms that were of concern to international donors and global health experts, for if the virus could be contained there, there was hope for keeping AI in check. The U.S. Government, as part of its Emergency Response to Avian Influenza Plan of Action, allocated some of its funds for the use of behavior change and communication (BCC) strategies to prevent and control AI outbreaks, primarily among backyard poultry farmers in high-risk countries, with Lao PDR being one of them.

It was under these circumstances that AED's AI-BCC Project began operations in Lao PDR in late 2005. The project targeted four priority provinces in Laos, primarily because they comprised 45 percent of the population, housed a high-density of poultry, and contained many trade routes and economic centers: Vientiane, Savannakhet, Champassack, and Luang Prabang. At the same time, there were pockets of difficult-to-reach farmers in all of these areas. Some were in ethnic minority communities that tend to be closed off to external communications due to geography and lack of common language and culture, while others were topographically inaccessible, separated from main routes by wide rivers or hillsides.

In this environment, traditional health communication strategies such as TV and radio spots would not be effective to reach these populations, thereby driving the AI-BCC project to invest significantly in “direct-to-the-community” partnerships and activities. The underlying hope was to lay the groundwork for building long-term capacity to prevent and respond to future outbreaks of avian influenza and other infections in Lao PDR, while also responding to immediate needs.

ENGAGING THE LAO WOMEN'S UNION

After surveying the landscape, the project decided to cultivate a partnership with the Lao Women's Union (LWU), a national women's organization with over 1 million highly motivated members and chapters at the provincial, district and village levels that could reach most communities in the country. The group was all-the-more appropriate because many LWU members were also backyard poultry farmers spread across the country, in rural, urban and semi-rural areas.

In addition to its geographic reach, the LWU seemed a logical partner due to initial findings from Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices surveys that villagers tend to trust and rely on information conveyed by neighbors, family and peers, with less credibility awarded to unfamiliar "experts." Credibility is an issue that is particularly important in responding to outbreaks, as one of tenets of effective risk communication is to provide information through trusted sources. In addition, the responsibility for raising poultry in backyard farms generally falls to the women in the household, so the Women's Union was an ideal conduit to conduct "woman-to-woman" communication.

BUILDING A PARTNERSHIP

In the words of one LWU leader, AI-BCC approached LWU at the right time. The Union leaders were not overburdened with other projects and were easily convinced that they had a large stake in ensuring that their communities were well-prepared to fend off future outbreaks. A network of trusted "AI experts" could be created, AI-BCC reasoned, and could filter from the national level down to the village level, providing information and training to backyard poultry farmers in raising healthy poultry and in controlling outbreaks if they happened to hit. AI-BCC would provide the technical assistance for training workshops and other capacity-building activities, while LWU would provide an existing and experienced network of volunteers willing to learn and take action to protect their communities.

After identifying common interests, LWU and AI-BCC implemented a plan of action, and eagerly began work on an advocacy activity to convince the rest of the Union's membership. An Avian Influenza Orientation and Advocacy Meeting was held at the national Lao Women's Union Congress, held in Vientiane in June 2006, with over 100 LWU members learning about how to prevent AI outbreaks. At the same time, the event provided an invaluable opportunity for AI-BCC staff to establish personal relationships with LWU leaders and actually listen to their concerns, strengths and limitations.

The advocacy meeting proved to be timely, as Laos suffered an AI outbreak only a few weeks later. Fresh from the orientation and armed with a few materials, the LWU members were able to disseminate information in their provinces, districts and communities. The outbreak situation motivated the partners to accelerate the development of materials, which, combined with "fast track" approval from the Lao government and USAID on materials, led to an impressive portfolio of ready-to-use prevention and containment materials by September of that year.

Empowered and excited by initial collaborations, LWU created an AI team including staff at headquarters and at each priority provincial branch office. A training-of-trainers (ToT) guide was developed, and through trainings at the national, provincial and district levels, LWU created a cadre of AI trainers and district educators in each district.

The partners had just completed district-level trainings in early 2007 when another outbreak hit. The LWU district representatives – 135 in all – sprang to action the day after the outbreak was announced, fanning out over 90 villages throughout Vientiane with AI information, covering all of the outbreak districts and some surrounding districts as well.

In a nod toward relationship building and solidarity, the LWU/Vientiane Capital chapter and AI-BCC celebrated their success with a walk to mobilize against AI that drew over 2,000 people. In addition to the walk itself, the mostly female crowd engaged in an AI quiz and met SuperKai (SuperChicken), a mascot of sorts who delivered recommendations on how to stop the spread of the virus. AI-BCC also collaborated with the LWU in other events and festivals intended to cement the interpersonal relationship and expand the reach of AI messages, such as International Women's Day.

TAKING OUTBREAK RESPONSE TO THE VILLAGE LEVEL

The real-life outbreak scenarios in 2006 and again in 2007 provided an early learning for the project and sent LWU, AI-BCC and other partners back to the planning table. LWU noted that many farmers were discouraged

with what they believed to be ideal-but-unattainable practices, such as fencing their poultry. Moreover, the project realized there were not any materials that specifically targeted village elders and other leaders, a group that project research had affirmed had the greatest ability to influence behaviors and practices on a household level.

To facilitate village-level outreach, AI-BCC devised an interpersonal communication guide that was used in village and other community settings such as temples and schools to reach backyard farmers. An “AI Package” was also developed. Housed in a plastic briefcase, the AI Package is a comprehensive collection of resources including a user guide, low-literacy posters and booklets, video and audio CDs, outbreak kits and other important materials and information that village authorities can use to help the residents of their villages prevent AI outbreaks and respond rapidly during outbreaks. LWU played a major role in training village leaders – some of whom were LWU members to begin with—on use of the kit.

A similar cascade approach was used with the AI Package, flowing from the national down to the village levels. In many cases, trainers had to travel by boat to reach otherwise-inaccessible communities, and often took a long time to disseminate materials to all of the affected villages. Regardless—and as a testament to the tenacity of the LWU members and project staff—each target village received at least one comprehensive AI package, as well as additional low-literacy posters and booklets for distribution to villagers.

In subsequent trainings, village chiefs were required to make a plan with district leaders and sign a letter promising to hold meetings and undertake follow-up activities. The concept of a promise ran both ways, and was reflected in some of the newer materials developed by the project. Rather than telling people what to do, some messages to farmers offered a promise (e.g., if you practice good biosecurity, you will be rewarded with no AI outbreaks).

The project also embarked on a participatory action research activity, again tapping into the LWU’s reach into sometimes-far-flung communities to facilitate the information collection and collaboration. The eight-month PAR study with farmers, village authorities and district officials in four villages was intended to gauge the feasibility of changing behaviors related to biosecurity based on the concept that village poultry are bound together in risk as “one village = one poultry flock.” The participatory process provided a win-win scenario: it offered insight into villagers’ interests and concerns about their lives, and it also served to create community communications activities that were realistic and achievable for the target audience.

RELATIONSHIP BUILDING BEYOND TRAININGS AND MATERIALS: NURTURING A COLLABORATIVE SPIRIT

As many international health programmers can attest, merely providing information and other technical assistance is not enough to build an effective and harmonious working relationship. AI-BCC worked to foster a spirit of openness and collegiality that permeated all project activities and interactions. Fortunately, Laos is, at its core, a collaborative culture where people prefer to reach consensus rather than staunchly argue opposing viewpoints. This atmosphere was complemented by project staff members who were either Lao nationals or also embodied these cooperative traits. LWU officials noted that they felt a spirit of openness and good intentions from project staff from the beginning, and appreciated that all of their questions or concerns along the way were met with a prompt and gracious reply. This responsiveness increased their comfort level with the project and allowed for smooth planning and implementation.

This rapport also facilitated the evolution of messages and materials so that they were most responsive to the concerns and realities of the target audience. LWU acknowledged that the activities and materials benefited from much trial and error, and a willingness to refine anything that was not deemed successful. Rather than waiting for the perfect materials to emerge, materials were created, used in practical, real-world environments, and then improved based on listening carefully to feedback from the field and end-users.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AN INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION NETWORK

Overall, the experience with the LWU has affirmed a maxim that bears repeating: that “word of mouth” is a much stronger medium than electronic broadcast media. The work with the LWU and village chiefs has borne this out, and has also demonstrated that building consensus from the bottom (village) level up ensures that populations lead the communicative process and have a stake in its outcome. Local ownership also ensures the cultural relevance and appropriateness of activities and messages and leads to the sustainability of the effort.

In the end, building on the credibility and network that the LWU has was critical in effectively in responding to and preventing large outbreaks among poultry and potentially among humans. The interpersonal nature of the trainings—LWU members as trainers and trainees—and the realistic nature of the proposed “correct” practices are two reasons why engaging local civil society organizations such as the LWU as partners and advocates is successful. The women’s union members’ ownership of correct information allowed them to tailor it to be more palatable and reflective of their neighbors’ realities and thus more likely to be followed.

Although the cascade approach to training and delivering information took time – especially because the issue and activity were new to many participants – the trainers in place can now be rapidly mobilized to conduct activities at the provincial, district and grassroots levels. Over 740 trainers at all of these levels were trained, all with experience in the delivery of community-based AI education. In fact, LWU has reported that its educators have contributed to other AI training and education projects, including those funded by FAO, CARE and other international agencies, proving that they are a critical component in any community-based campaign.

With AI outbreaks continuing throughout the region and with Laos’ neighbors still struggling with both animal and human cases of the virus, it is almost inevitable that an outbreak will revisit the country. Regardless, the AI-BCC project and LWU can feel reassured that there will be a team of able responders, ready to hit the streets, roads, paths and waterways, to help their compatriots weather the storm.



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