Animal health communication in South-East Asia

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Despite increasing recognition of the importance of communication in animal health, especially in recent zoonotic disease outbreaks, some studies have showed that there are gaps in its conceptualisation and practice (Alders and Bagnol 2007; Hickler 2007). This research project aims to define animal health communication and propose a model of its practice.

The aim of agricultural extension is to disseminate information and strategies produced by public researchers to farmers and other stakeholders (Zhou 2010). The theoretical framework governing this field is Roger’s Diffusion of Innovations (Waisbord 2001; Mefalopulos 2003, 2008; Zhou 2010). The Diffusion of Innovations theory follows the transmission model of communication or top-to-bottom communication. The theory states that development is transferred through channels from one country to another. However, a number of studies have disputed the effectiveness of this approach to development and communication, citing the pervasiveness of underdevelopment and the authoritarian nature of the theory (Craig 1999, 2007; Waisbord 2001; Mefalopulos 2003, 2008; Inagaki 2007; Servaes 2008). Development communication was later conceptualised from agricultural extension, not only with the intent of informing or transferring knowledge, but also for improving living standards (Waisbord 2001; Mefalopulos 2003, 2008; Manyozo 2006; Servaes 2008). A recent definition of development communication is:

a social process based on dialogue using a broad range of tools and methods. It is also about seeking change at different levels, including listening, building trust, sharing knowledge and skills, building policies, debating and learning for sustained and meaningful change. It is not public relations or corporate communication (Mefalopulos 2008).

Research activities

The research was conducted between 2006 and 2010 using quantitative and qualitative methodologies (Sarantakos 2005). The quantitative phase of the research consisted of a knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) survey, while the qualitative phases used participatory tools in the investigation of factors affecting animal health communication.

Among the study participants of the KAP survey were farmers, traders and animal health workers from Cambodia, Lao PDR and Vietnam. These Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) countries were selected because they represented low-, medium- and high-income earning countries, respectively. A combination of purposive and random sampling was used to select study participants. Local partners played a key role in the planning and implementation of the survey.

Some highlights of the KAP survey include the following:

- Despite extensive public awareness campaigns in the GMS countries, there is some awareness but poor knowledge on trans-boundary animal diseases such as classical swine fever, foot-and-mouth disease (FMD) and highly pathogenic avian influenza.

- There is a satisfactory level of technical awareness among the village animal health workers (VAHWs) but poor understanding of trans-boundary disease diagnosis.

- Farmers recognise the need to control and eradicate trans-boundary diseases; however, they do not see it as an urgent need.

- Study participants prefer television as a medium but have more exposure to radio.
The KAP survey gave an overview of what is happening in the field; however, it is important to know why and how these factors affect animal health communication. Therefore, further fieldwork was conducted in the three countries. Participatory tools such as transect walk, focus group discussions and interviews were used. The areas were chosen because of continuing efforts to establish FMD-free zones in the GMS. Results from the exploratory fieldwork showed that a number of factors affect animal health communication, including communication strategies, motivation to follow animal health messages, trusted communication channels, feedback/evaluation, government capacity, technical skills, funding and grassroots capacity.

The exploratory fieldwork confirmed some findings of previous studies such as the need for effective communication strategies and the existence of misunderstanding between the national animal health organisations and grassroots farmers (CARE International Vietnam and Quality of Life Promotion Centre 2005; Alders and Bagnol 2007; Hickler 2007). The role of volunteer animal health workers was also found to extend beyond delivering animal health services. The VAHWs engage farmers and other stakeholders to improve their behaviour in animal health. Although the exploratory fieldwork was satisfactory, there was still a need to further investigate why the factors affect communication in animal health. Methods were validated for use in further fieldwork.

The final field study took place in early 2010, this time in Cambodia and Laos. These countries were chosen because they have volunteer animal health services, unlike Vietnam which has paid animal health workers at the community level. The study participants also included national animal health authorities. The study confirmed that VAHWs play an important role in the delivery of services, especially in isolated communities. The role that they play in engaging a number of stakeholders in their area is invaluable because most remote areas in the GMS have their own language or dialect. Language was one of the factors that emerged as a key indicator in whether stakeholders will engage in any animal health campaign. Farmers and traders were willing to participate; however, they would rather that the government left them alone to manage their animals. They were willing to participate in government-initiated animal health campaigns if it cost them nothing, and there were some who claimed that they would be willing to pay a small amount for some services.

Another factor is the risk perception among the stakeholders, which depends on the nature of the disease; farmers and traders tend to put off the treatment or reporting of endemic animal diseases compared to potentially zoonotic diseases. Another level of motivation among stakeholders that would potentially change their motivation to report or give action is the cost that is associated with the disease. Generally, the more costly the disease or the animal involved, the better the reaction from the farmers or traders.

**Conclusions**

This research has contributed to an understanding of the implementation of animal health services in the region. It confirmed that VAHWs play a key role in the implementation of animal health strategies and engagement of various stakeholders. They are the gatekeepers at the village level, and maximising the training that VAHWs get will likely result in better delivery of animal health services, especially in remote areas.

Recent advances show that participatory approaches are more effective when addressing issues at the grassroots level. This has been the case in animal health where participatory approaches are increasing in use as an informed choice (Catley and Croxton 2001). The research showed that most of the study participants were willing to contribute to animal health planning, but acknowledged that they would need expert guidance to participate in such a team. Some critics argue that the participatory approach is idealistic and out of touch with reality. A purely participatory approach, where various stakeholders equally participate and contribute to the solution, might be impossible, but it is important to consider the opinion of all stakeholders, especially for animal health. There is existing indigenous knowledge on animal health that is yet to be tapped into, especially among grassroots stakeholders in remote areas. This is an important asset, particularly in regions where government services and personnel can only reach limited numbers of the population.

A purely participatory approach to animal health programs has yet to be investigated or implemented, but there are good opportunities to investigate the implications of such an approach. Participatory approaches have been used in economic development programs; however, development of animal health
strategies is a different field. Scientists are ultimately considered the authority, but considering stakeholders in the field also hold the key to the success of any animal health strategy. This might be the time to seriously consider investing in a genuinely participatory approach to animal health, or even investigating the implications of a participatory approach in animal health.

This research initially extended the United States Department of Health and Human Services’ definition of public health communication (National Cancer Institute 2003, 2005), and can be reworded as animal health communication is the study and use of communication strategies to inform and influence individual and community decisions to enhance animal health or prevent, control and eradicate animal diseases.

Based on interviews, field discussions and surveys, animal health communication is conceived in a number of ways in the field. It is the communication among animal health authorities, among grassroots stakeholders and between these two groups. It is composed of horizontal and vertical communication among various stakeholders who perceive that it will only work if it is backed by strong policies and funding. Strong policy and funding commitments are needed but have yet to be implemented.

References


