



SUCCESS STORY

The Power of Women Unites Communities to Prevent Avian Influenza

Phewlavanh Luangvanna of the Lao Women's Union recalls scanning the main road in Vientiane Capital and seeing nearly 3,000 people clad mostly in white t-shirts happily marching down the avenue, chatting and laughing, some holding flags and balloons. The 2007 "Walk to Mobilize Against AI" was a celebration of sorts; the Lao Women's Union, with the support of USAID's AI-BCC Project, managed by AED, had mobilized its members quickly to help get the word out on an avian influenza (AI) outbreak that hit 39 villages, mostly around the capital area, and led to the culling of over 345,600 birds. In addition to the walk itself, the mostly female crowd engaged in an AI quiz and met the colorful and gregarious SuperKai (SuperChicken), a mascot of sorts who delivered recommendations on how to stop the spread of the virus. "I'm proud of participating during the outbreak," Ms. Luangvanna declared, and "I'm also proud of the Walk we organized" with the Vientiane Capital Women's Union and the AI-BCC Project. "We even had key officers from various ministries and party leaders walking with us." The walk also brought together the Vientiane Capital Provincial governor and the governors from 6 of the 7 districts in Vientiane that experienced the outbreak directly. "This was a great opportunity for us all to acknowledge all of our hard work to bring the outbreak to an end, and to make sure we prevent future outbreaks".



Anton Schneider

The festive atmosphere did more than raise spirits and provide a weekend diversion – it further cemented the growing relationship between the LWU and the AI-BCC Project, a partnership that began in 2006 in the hopes of getting information on AI-preventive 'biosecurity' practices to farmers and their communities. The Women's Union, after all, boasted a membership of over 1 million highly motivated members and chapters at the provincial, district and village levels and could reach most communities in the country. Many LWU members, in fact, were backyard poultry farmers themselves and understood the need to learn how to prevent future outbreaks and avert the resulting economic hardship.

When the AI-BCC Project approached LWU, Ms. Luangvanna noted, "we were easily convinced that we had a large stake" in helping our communities prepare to fend off future outbreaks. The AI-BCC Project suggested that a network of trusted "AI experts" could be created through the

LWU's membership, and could flow from the national level down to the village level, providing information and training to backyard poultry farmers in raising healthy poultry and controlling outbreaks. 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. "We felt a spirit of openness and good intentions from the beginning," Ms. Luangvanna remarked.



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The partnership eagerly began work 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 in June 2006, with over 100 LWU members learning about how to prevent AI outbreaks. 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.

Empowered by their early success, LWU devoted staff at the national and provincial branches. A training-of-trainers guide was developed, and through workshops at the national, provincial and district

levels, a cadre of over 740 AI trainers and district educators was created in each district, all with experience in the delivery of community-based AI education.

District trainings had just been completed in early 2007 when the Vientiane-area 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. "We were very quick and effective," Ms. Luangvanna noted. "That's what we are acknowledging here" with the Walk.

"We have worked hard to get to this point," she explained, "and I feel good about what we did for our communities – we educated 40,000 women in the villages on prevention measures...and not just the women, but their families as well."

