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SUCCESS STORY

Capacity Building of Village Leaders

Villages Come Together to Improve Poultry Raising Practices and Fend off Avian Influenza Outbreaks

Farmer Phoumi Souphanouvong leaned forward and began speculating about why some farmers in Lao PDR were slow to change their farming practices to minimize their risk of avian influenza (AI) outbreaks. He began by reciting a Lao proverb: “It is easy to bend a young twig, but hard to bend an old tree.” Families that have been raising poultry for generations are often hesitant to change their habits if they have always been successful, he noted. “They would have to be convinced that it was worth doing, that it would help their family or their business,” Mr. Souphanouvong said, “and if the rest of the community was doing it, it would be even better.”



Anton Schneider

The farmer's conclusions mirrored findings collected under knowledge, attitudes and practices (KAP) surveys conducted by USAID's Avian Influenza -Behavior Change Communication (AI-BCC) Project, implemented by AED. The surveys found that farmers were hesitant to make changes related to poultry raising, such as separating chickens from ducks and other animals, quarantining new poultry before allowing them to mingle with existing flocks, cleaning away feces regularly, and reporting suspected cases of AI to the proper authorities. The surveys also revealed, however, that farmers were susceptible to a form of peer pressure: if they were urged to make changes by the leaders of their community, they were more likely to follow them.

The AI-BCC Project set off to engage these village leaders as influencers and conduits of information and action. The initial focus was in "building the capacity of village heads to mitigate the risks of an outbreak," explained Dr. Phoumy Bodhisane of the Lao government's Center of Information and Education for Health. An "AI Package" providing a variety of resources – such as low-literacy posters and booklets, video and audio CDs, and outbreak kits – was created for village leaders to use when responding to and preventing outbreaks. Partners who were familiar with community members, such as the Lao Women's Union, were trained to help introduce this information and the use of the kit to village leaders. In subsequent trainings, village chiefs were asked to forge a plan with district leaders and sign a letter promising to hold follow-up meetings and activities.

Many village leaders found it easy to convey the information to their neighbors, as they believed it was useful on a personal level. "I took the training on safe poultry raising, and I also applied such learnings to my family, because they made sense," explained Keooudone Saengounthone, the Village Chief of Phosy. "I also shared my experience and knowledge with other villagers," he noted, which made it easier to recruit households to become "model families" in safe poultry raising. The model families were intended to serve as real-life examples of how fellow community members could implement biosecurity measures on their farms and reinforce that poultry in a community is bound together in risk as "one village = one poultry flock." The tactic seemed to work. "We established 10 families as the model families to follow biosecurity measures in poultry raising," Mr. Saengounthone related. "Thereafter, these 10 families reached out to 20 families," and the pattern continued. Monthly meetings were held with the villagers to reinforce the preventive practices, and to "collect information on how to raise birds more safely."

Gathering impressions and experiences from these farmers, their families and village leaders, in fact, helped to determine which practices were feasible, and shaped future materials and activities to prevent AI. A Participatory Action Research (PAR) study with farmers, village authorities and district officials in four villages also provided valuable lessons. The PAR engaged village authorities, village veterinary workers and volunteer farmers (poultry raisers) on identifying and implementing realistic biosecurity measures to prevent poultry diseases from entering the village, and to mitigate disease impact.

AI-BCC assistance has provided comprehensive training, along with complete AI Outbreak Packages for village leaders in over 300 villages in 4 districts in Vientiane, Savannakhet, Champassack and Luang Prabang. In addition, this network of trainers and trainees has been used to strengthen pandemic preparedness skills as the country readies itself for the 2009 Influenza A H1N1 pandemic.

In the end, "we have created a network of trained people across the district and village



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levels” to deliver information, noted Dr. Bodhisane. “We discussed and exchanged [information] and planned together to implement activities based on consensus that we have not been able to get in the past.” Bringing these groups together in itself, he added, “is a great success.”

