Global Avian Influenza Behavior Change and Communications Support Activity – AI.COMM

The AI.COMM Project was created by USAID in 2006 to lead an effective, worldwide avian influenza behavior change and communication response – in a way that would be responsive to rapidly-changing circumstances, could be quickly implemented, and would be suited to the emergency nature of avian influenza outbreaks as well as attuned to the specific needs of individual countries and regions. Since AI.COMM’s inception, AED has been delivering this rapid-response BCC in over 30 countries in Africa, East Asia, South Asia, the Middle East, and Eurasia, and has moved beyond emergency response in situations where it is warranted.

Over time, AI.COMM has designed and implemented a wide variety of communication activities to address everything from one-time emergency outbreaks to situations where long-term, integrated communication initiatives were deemed necessary, as in regions where H5N1 had become endemic. Although each country’s situation has been different, many of the same concerns and outcomes arose: widespread H5N1 virus outbreaks led to significant disruption in health systems and services, loss of income, and a significant burden on human health. The project goals were therefore to reduce exposure risk; enhance national capacity; and promote long-term behavior change related to AI to mitigate these effects.

APPROACH AND STRATEGIES

A wide range of communication strategies – mass media, interpersonal communications, community mobilization, public relations, and advocacy – have connected with numerous audiences, including human and animal health workers, rural backyard farmers, market vendors, drivers/transporters, commercial farmers, government officials, and private-sector decision makers. AI.COMM has used communication tools actively and effectively to engage governments, civil society, and the private sector to plan for and respond to both episodic outbreaks and endemic situations.

AI.COMM uses an integrated BCC approach which includes several tested strategies that, when meshed together, can successfully deliver information on how to prevent and control avian influenza and blunt the potential for a human pandemic. These include:

• Interpersonal communications, such as farmer education by extension agents and veterinary staff, patient counseling by clinic health workers, peer education (farmer-to-farmer; union member to union member), and informal discussion (vendor-to-consumer; neighbor-to-neighbor).
• Mobilizing organizational and community groups, such as factories and other workplace settings, schools, community and village civil society groups, women’s unions, farmer associations, and health associations.
• Mass media (including national TV, radio, and print) and web-based communication.
• Advocacy and public relations, such as high-level, thought-leader conferences, as well as press briefings and trainings to increase the media’s understanding and access to correct information.
• Collaborations with private sector organizations.

Much of the work has had a strong collaborative element. AED/USAID has worked closely with the USAID Missions as well as with the World Health Organization, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, UNICEF, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, and the U.S. Department of State to ensure that coordinated, country-specific communication strategies and materials are developed and implemented. Coordination with organizations within each country – from government Ministries to local and
international NGOs, to village organizations and local unions – has been a key to success. Moreover, coordination between the animal and human health communities has reinforced messages and their effectiveness.

Materials and other information are available at an online clearinghouse of information – www.avianflu.aed.org – that can be tapped into by governmental and non-governmental organizations worldwide. The project also operates several information sharing and dissemination online tools, such as ePlume, a bilingual (French and English) online discussion forum for practitioners in West Africa, and a listserv for those working on AI in South Asia.

OTHER ACTIVITIES TO DATE

Since AI.COMM began in June 2006, activities have ranged from emergency outbreak response and communication capacity rapid assessments; to the development of integrated communication strategies that include advocacy, social mobilization and communication; to the design of prototype BCC tools such as job aids, training modules and how-to guides that can be adapted on a regional or country level.

Products. Communication materials that have been developed are job aids for animal health workers, culling workers, and human health providers; booklets for farmers and the general public on biosecurity measures; counseling cards; an emergency risk communication guide; media orientation workshop materials and training modules; peer education modules; an advocacy manual; a workplace education and planning guide; school-based materials; and training modules on USAID-provided commodities (such as personal protective equipment, disinfection supplies and rapid test kits). Training modules have also been developed to assist governments in interpersonal communications, planning, and how to establish an informational hotline for the reporting of outbreaks.

Research and Monitoring and Evaluation. A wide-variety of qualitative and quantitative research has been conducted in over 20 countries, and has ranged from Values and Beliefs Studies, Knowledge, Attitudes and Practices Surveys, Participatory Action Research, and pre-testing of materials and messages. The findings from these research activities have been employed to design projects, tailor messages and materials, and inform the project and its activities. Supply chain analyses have also been conducted in several countries and cross-border regions, and have identified gaps and barriers that can contribute to the virus spreading. Assessments of training and capacity building activities, as well as the support materials, have also been conducted to evaluate their impact and value. The project also has developed a conceptual framework that can be used to respond to AI and other emerging infectious diseases.

Pandemic Preparedness. In 2007, AI.COMM was also tasked with leading communications work related to pandemic preparedness under the Humanitarian Pandemic Preparedness (H2P) Initiative. The Humanitarian Pandemic Preparedness Initiative (H2P) is a three year, USAID-funded initiative, whose goal is to build a fully prepared and deployable capacity of likely responders during an influenza pandemic. These responders will provide the rapid, coordinated, and effective response designed to limit morbidity and mortality, safeguard livelihoods, and maintain societal cohesion and integrity. This initiative intends to support community-level planning on how to organize, coordinate, and deliver an effective humanitarian response in countries deemed to be most vulnerable to an outbreak of pandemic influenza. In addition to AI.COMM, H2P partners include the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC), the CORE Group (an association of U.S. private voluntary organizations including Save the Children, CARE, World Vision, and others), Interaction (also an association of U.S. NGOs), and United Nations agencies, including OCHA and the WFP.

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