Rapid Avian and Human Influenza

Inter-Agency Assessment Mission to Nigeria.

DRAFT

Country profile
Country has population of approximately 130 million: poultry population estimated to be the same: 50% of population living below the poverty line: amongst other development activities, improvements in governance are a priority for government.

Highlights
High level commitment by Government of Nigeria. The Resident Coordinators office channeled rapid support via WHO, FAO (with OiE), UNICEF. In addition, there has been keen donor engagement including World Bank, EU amongst others. Government aware that avian influenza outbreak may have implications for whole of country and region.

Immediate response support is focusing initially on avian influenza containment, with deployment of experts and support from FAO (together with PACE, USAID, US CDC and DFID) and WHO. UNICEF and the Ministry of Information are coordinating the communication response, with mass media already mobilized and plans underway to engage networks of traditional leaders and others. Initial needs identified for Avian influenza response, but capacity support for pandemic preparedness is a priority, and government may require significant support, both with national planning and international cooperation.

At the State level, Kaduna State response was fast, but challenges remain, including need for immediate augmentation of veterinary support, health surveillance capacity, and enhancement of state-to-state coordination and linkages to Federal government. Federal government sensitizing all States on implementation issues including how to ensure compliance of culling, how to assure its citizens that the state will compensate, and close dialogue on implications of livelihoods.

Background

Avian (bird) Influenza (AI) is a viral infection caused by strains of influenza that normally occurs among birds. Wild birds worldwide carry the virus in their intestines, but do not get sick from them. The virus is shed from carrier birds through their droppings, thus contaminating the environment. However, AI is very contagious among domesticated birds, including chickens, ducks and turkeys, causing illness and death. Bird flu viruses do not normally infect other species of animals and man, but several cases of human infection caused by different kinds of bird flu viruses have occurred since 1997. The major concern is that the virus could mutate and gain ability to spread easily from one person to another, resulting in a pandemic.

Inter-Agency mission

Following close coordination between agencies in New York, and series of regional inter-agency consultations in Africa, an Inter-agency Task Force comprising of the World Health Organisation (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and United Nations System Influenza Coordination office (UNSIC) conducted a rapid assessment for the state of readiness in Nigeria between 15 – 20 February 2006. The main trust of the assessment was two fold:

1. Rapid assessment of veterinary and health requirements and communications
2. Rapid assessment of the organization of effective service delivery – at both Federal and State levels

The team, working under the overall guidance of the Resident Coordinator, met with both the representatives of the Government of Nigeria (GON) including the President, Minister of Health, Minister of Agriculture, Minister of Information together with other key representatives of the Avian Influenza Task Force, established by the GON. In addition it met with key representatives of the UN system, donors, and a number of other key stake holders including the media. A field visit was conducted to the State of Kaduna where members met with members of the local Avian Influenza Response Committee.

Main findings:

Coordination

- Under the leadership of President Olusegun Obasanjo, the government established a Steering Committee headed by the President, involving heads of key ministries, including agriculture, health, finance, information, and security forces.
- The GON has established a Crisis Centre linking with the affected States.
- The GON has also established a Communication Committee at the Crisis Centre, chaired by the Minister of Information and National Orientation. Terms of Reference, frequency of meetings, partners and reporting obligations are being developed – and input from the UNCT has been welcomed.
- The UNCT can strengthen the capacity of the Communication Committee to develop appropriate information materials and messages, establish an information coordination structure (including spokespersons), and provide updates and simple questions and answers.
- GON already broadcasting awareness messages on state-controlled media.
- GON establishing a web domain for Avian Influenza including response structures, triggers for action, names of key personnel by function(s), telephone numbers, fax and e-mail addresses. (This will be accessible internationally, and will be a useful platform for neighboring countries).
- Under the leadership of the Resident Coordinator, the UN established a Task Force geared to support the government efforts in both preparedness and response.
- In support of the Task Force, an Avian and Human Influenza (AHI) coordination cell has been established under the guidance of the UN Resident Coordinator's office.
- The AHI cell supported the government with the consolidation of both financial, material and human requirements for health, agriculture, communication and coordination sectors (matrix of requirements shared with UN Task Force including interested donors).

Challenges

- Need for full sensitization of Avian and Human Influenza issues at all levels, including Federal, State and Community authorities.
- Sensitization to include an appreciation of potential impact on livelihoods, including human health, economic needs, governance, security, development and humanitarian requirements.
- Need to augment mass media messages with large-scale interpersonal communication through established networks of traditional leaders, teachers, etc.
- Need for integrated Pandemic Preparedness Planning at both Federal and State authorities.
- Government needs to establish plans for the maintenance of essential services such as security, governance, and key infrastructure services.
- Need to augment both veterinary services with laboratory capacity
- Need to develop response strategies

Communication response

On February 17th and 18th, UNICEF and the Ministry of Information convened a consultative meeting on communication for avian flu, with participation from ministries, UN agencies, bilateral agencies, media organizations and NGOs.

The group developed a work plan for avian flu communication and placed existing messages in a Nigerian context. Before the Communication Committee was created, the government established a Public Enlightenment Committee on avian flu. If the Public Enlightenment Committee is to provide technical support to the Communication Committee, membership should be expanded to include UNICEF, WHO, FAO, USAID, UNDP and private media (TV and FM radio stations). In any case, the relationship between existing committees should be clarified.

The Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation employs Information Officers based in the States who liaise with State Information Officers. However, there is no direct line of authority from the Federal Ministry to State Commissioners for Communication. Unclear lines of authority have the potential to impede clear communication on avian flu. The UNCT works on communication at both national and state levels and often with local government authorities as well. For example, polio social mobilization committees extend from federal to state to local government levels. These structures and working relationships can be adapted for avian flu communication, in close collaboration with the agreement of State and Federal governments.

Mass media messages have already been developed by the Ministry of Information on basic awareness of avian flu, animal care and human hygiene. They are being broadcast on state-controlled media but not yet on private media. In addition to broadcasting messages, the mass media strategy should be strengthened with the production of discussion-based programmes (panels, phone-ins, etc) that allow local leaders, farmers and parents to discuss the messages and propose ways for local people to act on them.

A larger communication challenge is to strengthen large-scale interpersonal communication through social networks. People are much more likely to act on messages if they come from trusted sources and if they have a chance to discuss them and how they can best be acted on. In Nigeria, the UNCT has worked in partnership with government to develop networks in support of polio eradication and the national census that can be used in support of interpersonal communication on avian flu. The Ministry of Information structure includes the National Orientation Agency that conducts social mobilisation activities. Other important networks include traditional leaders, religious leaders, teachers, extension workers (both health and agriculture), women's groups and the National Youth Service Corps. The UNCT can provide technical assistance to the Communication Committee to mobilize these networks and produce audience-specific materials for them.

An urgent and specific communication challenge is media coverage of compensation to farmers for culling poultry. Once the government has determined precise procedures for claiming compensation, the procedures should be widely publicized in a set of clear, concise messages. To build trust with the public, wide media coverage should be organized for the first farmers to receive compensation. In addition, programme planning should consider recovery strategies for impact upon livelihoods.

Animal health response

Avian influenza virus infection (H5N1) in domestic poultry was formally reported by the Nigerian Veterinary Authorities on February7, 2006. The disease was confirmed at Jaji in Kaduna State by the FAO/OIE reference laboratory in Italy. To date only the outbreak in Kaduna has been confirmed internationally. However, AI virus type A has been identified by the National Veterinary Research Institute (NVRI) in Jos-Plateau State in Kano and Plateau State.

Specimens from these two states have been sent to the OIE/FAO reference laboratory in Italy for confirmation. However, suspected outbreaks of AI have been reported from Katsina, Yobe, Oyo, Borno, Ogun, Jigawa, Nassarawa, Bauchi and Delta States. Confirmation of the virus type from samples sent to NVRI is being awaited. Rumours of deaths in poultry attributed to AI abound and not easily discernable clinically as AI or due to other diseases of poultry especially Newcastle disease which widely occurs in the country at this time of the year.

Since the confirmation of AI (H5N1) in poultry, the Nigerian Government has taken concrete decisions concerning the crisis and has started to respond in a very positive way. Culling of poultry to check the spread of the disease has been done and ongoing in Kaduna, Kano and Bauchi States. However there are difficulties to implement culling and the institution of bio-security measures. Also control of animal movements will be a major challenge. Surveillance for fresh outbreaks continues in the affected and suspected States. Vaccination has so far not been considered.

The National Veterinary Research Institute (NVRI) in Vom, has capacity to conduct laboratory tests, including virus isolation and some serological tests. Staff will need hands-on training to perform some other tests such as Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR).

Critical Needs

- There is an urgent need for the improvement of AI surveillance systems in rapid detection of active disease and extent of its spread (antibody detection). Materials supplies such as electric generators, laptops, laboratory equipment and reagents are urgently needed. FAO has completed and submitted an immediate needs assessment (for the next 6 months). Medium and long-term needs are being prepared in close collaboration with national authorities.

- Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) is required to protect personnel engaged in surveillance/culling/depopulation and laboratory diagnostic work, as well as disinfectants and spray pumps and motorcycles.

- Stringent control strategies including, movement control of animals and humans from and into infected areas, strict bio-security measures, culling and consideration for vaccination of targeted populations based on surveillance results should be considered.

- One crucial problem, which is also key to soliciting farmer/owner co-operation to enhance success of control strategies, is the enforcement of culling decisions and institution and execution of compensation.

- Advocacy will be critical in obtaining the implementation of harmonised and epidemiologically sound control measures. This should be directed to the State Government

- Strategic stocks of vaccines, syringes and protective gear should be procured immediately.

Health sector

Planning and Coordination

The GON started its own planning on Avian and Human influenza in October 2005. In addition they have participated in meetings in Ottawa, Canada; Brazzaville, Congo, and Beijing, China – the latter in January 2006. With support of both WHO and UNCIEF, the MOH produced its Health Plan and circulated its Health Plan in December 2005. This plan has been revised and was re-distributed 18 February 2006.

The MOH's Immediate Response Team is working with both the Federal and State authorities but challenges for coordination remain. In addition they are engaging with local governments to provide the necessary technical assistance to strengthen the public health departments. In particular, MOH will encourage all 36 States and the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), together with Local Government Authorities (LGA) to conduct drills and exercises with which to assess their readiness to respond to an human influenza pandemic. In addition, WHO rapid response teams, together with CDC, are working closely with the authorities to enhance both planning and response mechanisms.

State Level – Kaduna
Further to discussions with officials in Abuja, the mission was able to visit Kaduna State on 20th February 2006. Detailed discussions were held with local officials together with representatives from both WHO and UNICEF. The Kaduna State Avian Flu Response Committee comprises of key officials from the Ministry of Agriculture, Health, Environment, Information, Police, State Security Service, State Emergency Management Agency, Christian Association of Nigeria, Jama'atu – Nasil Islam, local 'traditional' leaders, WHO and UNICEF. Such coordination should be commended. However, it is evident that significant assistance needs to be provided both in terms of pandemic preparedness, diagnostic facilities and surveillance capacity including the means for surveillance officers to collect gather information . The Response Committee was adamant on being proactive, and wishes to establish systematic monitoring through out its State.

Challenges
- Lack of sufficient equipment for personnel
- Lack of equipment for laboratories
- Lack of protective equipment (PPE).
  (Note – 16,000 PPE kits donated by DFID in-country)
- Lack of understanding on case management practices
- Lack of Laboratory bio-safety guidelines for handling specimens.
- Weak surveillance system
- Mouth pipeting is still commonly in use and this must be strictly forbidden;
- Proper disposal of contaminated materials is not fully in place
- Lab hygiene should be strictly enforced
- Personal protective equipment must be removed before leaving the laboratory.

WHO has recommended that countries strengthen their national surveillance system. This includes strengthening their national influenza laboratories, training public health personnel, providing diagnostic reagents and other material support, and testing novel virus isolates from humans and animals. WHO has strengthened its Global Outbreak and Response Network (GOARN) to assist in surveillance and response worldwide and has established a fund to ensure that laboratory specimens are shipped in a timely way to reference laboratories for further diagnostic analysis and confirmation. Nigeria should endeavour to benefit from this.

As noted in the MOH Health Plan (updated February 2006), there are few laboratories. Ibadan and Maiduguri which have basic containment facilities with bio-safety Level 2 (BSL2). Given the size of population in Nigeria , an assessment should be made on the utility of a BSL3 facility.

Recommendations
- Assistance in reinforcing the national disaster management network for pandemic response
- Provision of personal protection equipment for both veterinary workers and health specialists
- Capacity support in surveillance and case management procedures
- Establishment of rapid response investigation teams for each State together with standard operating procedures and equipment

Compensation of poultry farmers
The poultry sub-sector represents an excellent opportunity for the diversification of the economy and an affordable income generating activities for poor families. This is being compromised on one hand by the loss of chicken due to culling and on the other by the loss of consumer's confidence in the poultry products. In view of the foregoing, the national authorities, Federal and State levels, in their respective areas of competence and with the assistance of the international community are addressing the problem under two broad areas: an effective and adequate system of compensation for the chicken ordered to be culled and a communication strategy that convey the right message for self protection without driving away consumers from poultry products. In that connection,

- The national authorities are encouraged to conclude the ongoing consultations between the poultry farmer's association and government officials in view of determining the compensation's scale for different poultry and other bird products. The effective implementation of the above compensation will be an effective inducement for the prompt notification of avian influenza by farmers and will greatly improve the effectiveness of the campaign to stamp out the epizootic,
- An effective campaign must be staged immediately to win back consumers to the poultry market,
- Given the economic potential of the poultry sub-sector, with the assistance of the international organizations, the government should initiate studies for the recovery of the poultry sector once the epizootic is brought under control. (The World Food Programme, (WFP) should be contacted to see if they could provide technical support / food security expertise).

Conclusion

The UN should continue to provide support to assist the government achieve its objective of minimizing the impact of avian influenza and reducing its chance of mutating into the deadly Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), and affecting not just Nigeria, but the region and potentially the whole of Africa. It should continue to work closely together with the World Bank, PACE, EU, USAID, and DFID and other interested parties in the design of an overall strategy for the GON. The strategy should be flexible and be geared on two fronts: immediate response and preparedness for pandemic.