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“Bridging the gap between increasing knowledge and decreasing resources”

Capacity Building on ‘Ecohealth’ in Southeast Asia — Successes and Challenges

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Abstract

To address current challenges related to disease emergences in livestock and humans, new integrated approaches are needed to promote collaboration between involved actors and groups towards more effective control. Southeast Asia is considered a hotspot for diseases emergence as demonstrated with Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) and Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS). Such new approaches include the ‘ecohealth’ (EH) concept, an approach pioneered over the last decades by the International Development Research Centre, Canada (IDRC).

To promote EH in the region, the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI) implemented, between 2008 and 2013, a capacity building project (EcoZD) funded by IDRC targeting six Southeast Asia countries. Apart from this, also the added value of EH was evaluated. The overall objective was ‘to increase the knowledge, skills and capacity of research and infectious disease control personnel in Southeast Asia to understand the risks and impacts of emerging infectious diseases (EIDs) and how feasible options can best be implemented and adapted’ via a ‘learning by doing’ approach. ILRI’s role throughout the project was a mentoring one. The initial step included identifying partners from various disciplines in each country. Research teams were formed and requested to reach an internal consensus of what zoonotic disease(s) they priorities for research. Following this, each team developed specific research proposals. Outcome mapping was used to measure aspiration of EH into research. In a subsequent step to address lack of EH capacity on academic level, two ecohealth resource centres were established in universities.

All teams have presented their case studies at international conferences; Writing of publications in local languages and submitting to international peer-reviewed journals is ongoing. In addition, follow-up EH research proposals have been developed and funded for selected teams. Implemented EH case studies provide an excellent reference for other ecohealth initiatives. Challenges throughout the project were various and complex, such as ‘loose’ definitions of ecohealth, consensus on research topics, language and cultural barriers, silo thinking, lack of qualitative research skills but also on proposal writing, study design and analysis.

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