Public engagement paves the path to impact in Kenya

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Biological sampling and laboratory work are always going to be critical to a project exploring disease transmission. For the ZELS project Zoonoses in Livestock in Kenya (ZooLinK) it was also critical that a process of relationship building and public engagement was prioritised. It is set to pay dividends long after the project is over.

In Kenya, the burden of endemic zoonotic disease is thought to be greatly underestimated. ZooLinK’s aim was to develop an integrated surveillance system for 15 zoonotic diseases in western Kenya to understand the prevalence of zoonoses and how this might evolve in the future.

For the project to make a difference, it was essential that research findings and insights were communicated so they could feed into everything from changes in people’s behaviour to policymaking. The relationship-building necessary for this began early on, with ZooLinK researchers consulting with the Kenyan Government’s Zoonotic Disease Unit (ZDU) at project design stage. It further developed through close working with the county governments of Busia, Bungoma and Kakamega, where ZooLinK’s sampling took place. County governments have, for example, taken the first steps to changing their brucellosis diagnostic tests in public sector hospitals for surveillance of this disease based directly on ZooLinK research results. County Directorate of Veterinary Services (DVS) staff were also seconded to the project so that project results could directly impact their daily practice.

At a national level, researchers’ relationships with the ministries of health and livestock have resulted in contributions to national policies on rabies, antimicrobial resistance (AMR), emerging viruses, Rift Valley fever, brucellosis and overall surveillance policy. The project has also assisted in the development of Kenya’s National Strategic Plan for One Health.

Locally at their sampling sites, ZooLinK researchers provided regular feedback to participants, distributing site-specific results in pamphlets and holding discussions at locations where participants gathered, such as marketplaces and slaughterhouses. Additional funding has been obtained to estimate the impact of these activities on knowledge and behaviours.

Other engagement opportunities were spotted during the research process itself. For example, observation of the parlous state of the protective clothing worn by slaughterhouse workers led the team to develop a series of sessions on hygiene, public health and AMR, and animal welfare for workers. They combined these sessions with the distribution of protective equipment, reaching many hundreds of workers.

Training materials have been widely disseminated, including educational videos on animal welfare at slaughter and on the risks of AMR which have been taken up by government partners and disseminated nationally, ensuring an impact that will continue into the longer-term future.

Zoonoses in Livestock in Kenya

Principal Investigator: Professor Eric Fèvre, University of Liverpool, UK, and International Livestock Research Institute, Kenya

Partners:
- University of Liverpool, UK (lead)
- International Livestock Research Institute, Kenya
- Kenya Medical Research Institute, Kenya
- University of Edinburgh, UK
- University of Nairobi, Kenya
- University of Nottingham, UK

“The various engagement activities enhanced the flow of information between us - the researchers - and the government veterinary services. They could tell us what was most important to them, and we could share with them what we were working on.”

Dr Laura Falzon, ZooLinK post-doctoral researcher