Researchers and pig farmers share practices to improve health and livelihoods in Myanmar

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Myanmar pig farmers are developing new pig keeping practices benefiting both their health and livelihoods as a result of innovative workshops in which they learn from their farming neighbours, vets and researchers.

And thanks to communication via both social and traditional media, positive public health messages about diseases people can acquire from pigs will be spread across the country and even further afield.

Many Myanmar rural households, as well as those on the edges of towns, keep pigs as a valued source of income and food. Pig farming is also intensifying in Myanmar in response to urbanisation and increasing wealth. But diseases transmitted between pigs and from pigs or pig meat to people can damage livelihoods and wellbeing.

The ZELS-funded project An integrated approach for surveillance and control of zoonoses in emerging livestock systems (Myanmar Pig Partnership) explored the links between these disease risks and changing pig production and consumption patterns in Myanmar. Results show for example that Salmonella bacteria, a major cause of diarrhoea in people, is widespread in retail pig meat in Yangon. Levels of antibiotic resistance of Salmonella – a major global health challenge – varied, being highest in more intensive production systems and lowest in traditional rural systems.

A key aim of the Myanmar Pig Partnership was to identify sustainable ways to improve livelihoods for low-income farmers by gathering evidence to support training and learning interventions aimed at better animal health and public health. This led to two pilot initiatives:

Farm Management Workshops (FMWs) and Veterinary Advisory Visits. The FMWs were a discovery-based group adult education approach which used observation, experimentation and sharing by participants to support farmer learning and build skills.

The workshops saw up to 20 pig farmers from small pig farms in two villages in the Yangon region meeting fortnightly with a facilitator. Farmers helped determine the workshops’ agendas, exploring topics related to nutrition, disease and profitability. The facilitator built on the farmers’ existing understanding, introducing important concepts in as immediate and concrete a manner as possible using photos, videos and diagrams.

A key learning was that disease, whether zoonotic or pig-specific, is often transmitted through the same pathways. So measures that help limit the spread of pathogens that cause recognised diseases such as piglet diarrhoea can also limit the spread of less-recognised zoonotic diseases such as salmonella.

Initial feedback indicates that these workshops resulted in changes at both individual and collective levels. Many of the farmers now change their footwear before entering pig pens, and shower and wash their hands more frequently. Groups and whole villages are now insisting that traders leave their trucks outside their village rather than bring them on to farms, and they are jointly purchasing vaccines. All are important for good biosecurity.

The FMWs were a pilot initiative and only reached small numbers directly. However, an active Facebook strategy is ensuring that the shared learning is continuing to be spread.

A ‘User Guide’ will enable other programmes in Myanmar and elsewhere to adapt the approach.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) is also interested in the FMW initiative as there are few farmer education initiatives in intensifying livestock systems that take such a One Health approach.

**“Most of our farmers have already made changes to their biosecurity measures, such as banning visitors coming inside the sty, cleaning and disinfecting frequently, showering and changing their footwear more frequently, and using gloves.”**

Myo Min, Farm Management Workshop facilitator