Engaging farmers in surveillance

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Passive, farmer-based reporting systems provide a valuable contribution to surveillance for several different purposes, including demonstrating freedom from disease and assessing the distribution and level of endemic diseases. Moreover, farmer-based reporting is critical for early detection of disease, as no other practical or affordable alternative exists that is able to provide the same high level of population coverage and frequency of observation that are required for effective early detection.

Traditionally, there have been many challenges in encouraging farmers and other field-based reporters to be involved in timely and comprehensive disease reporting. This paper presents experience from Indonesia, where innovative approaches to gathering surveillance information from farmers have been adopted. These include the use of text messaging for direct submission of data to the powerful cloud-based central database as well as comprehensive automated feedback systems. However, the key element was the adoption of a set of philosophical principles that guided the development of the reporting system.

In almost all countries, reporting systems are designed by top-level decision-makers to provide the surveillance data required for their own needs, including planning and evaluating national programmes and reporting to the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). In Indonesia, a bottom-up approach has been used, where the reporting system has been designed entirely to meet the needs of farmers and local disease control staff. The result is that farmers and field staff get direct, immediate and personal benefit from their participation in disease reporting, as they obtain the information that they need to manage current disease problems. Data for higher-level decision makers may be thought of as a by-product of an effective system designed to meet farmers’ needs.

The system was developed through a multi-disciplinary approach involving sociologists who seek to ensure that the benefits of participation for all stakeholders greatly outweigh any potential costs.