



EDUCATION OF AT RISK COMMUNITIES

D. Balaram

Global Alliance for Rabies Control (GARC), 529 Humboldt St., Suite 1 Manhattan, Kansas, 66502, United States of America

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Deepashree Balaram is the Campaigns Director at the Global Alliance for Rabies Control (GARC), working on World Rabies Day coordination, partner campaigns, communications, and End Rabies Now campaign development. A veterinarian by training, previous roles include Companion Animals Director for WSPA (now World Animal Protection), International Development Director for Animal Defenders International and co-founder of ACTAsia for Animals.

SUMMARY

Increasing awareness of rabies prevention and control in communities is an integral part of any successful rabies control or elimination programme.

At the most basic level, individuals cannot stay safe if they do not know that they need to keep their dogs vaccinated to prevent rabies; how to prevent dog bites; and what to do if bitten, including washing the wound and getting post-exposure prophylaxis, if needed. At a broader level, engagement or even ownership of the programme by the community will ensure that key messages reach all community members, appropriate action is taken to prevent deaths, and implementation is supported or led by the community.

Community engagement should ideally start before a canine vaccination programme is implemented. Once a programme is underway, this continued engagement is fundamental to the success of an intervention to help access and vaccinate the dogs in the area. Better understanding of community attitudes towards rabies and their dogs can also help avoid adverse community reactions that can occur, for instance to culling, that may destroy trust in programmes and have counterproductive effects on rabies control.

The Global Alliance for Rabies Control (GARC), with its project partners, has implemented an intersectoral approach to building and maintaining community engagement, empowering at-risk communities in the Philippines and Indonesia to take responsibility. It has developed stakeholder-specific messages on rabies to not only raise awareness but also advocate for behaviour change within the community. The educational interventions focus on rabies prevention, bite prevention and responsible pet ownership, and target school-goers, pre-schoolers and out of school youths.

Approaches include integration of rabies education into the school curriculum; training teachers, school nurses and Girl Scout leaders to provide lifesaving information, and 'edutainment' tools such as storytelling, community theatre and colouring books; lectures for parents; community engagement through participatory planning; and involvement of village volunteers to vaccinate dogs and conduct dog surveys, and also to establish early warning and rapid response systems at the village level.

To further increase community awareness outside its project areas, GARC has set up online Rabies Educator Certificate and Animal Handlers and Vaccinators Education Certificate courses that can significantly increase rabies focal points in the community with the capacity to share life-saving information down to the village level.