

EXTENSION PROGRAMMES

DEDICATED TO THE ACTIVITIES OF THE VETERINARY SERVICES

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Summary: *Extension programmes could be defined as the dissemination of technical knowledge in order to benefit the community in general. When referring to veterinary extension programmes, Veterinary Services appear to be involved to varying degrees. Veterinary extension activities in the Middle East region are, in general, the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture, since the private sector and other organisations still contribute very little to extension activities. Currently, the resources allocated to veterinary extension are very limited.*

Veterinary extension presently faces many problems due to the weakness and/or absence of effective extension services, in addition to the absence of well defined programmes to guide and support animal production, and health programmes designed for the control of animal disease and improvement of food safety standards.

This weak veterinary extension is also caused by the insufficient number of veterinarians working in the region and their limited practical experience interacting effectively with animal producers, especially women, in order to tackle animal health issues and nutrition-related diseases more generally. Despite playing a vital role in animal production activities and husbandry traditions in the region, the training provision for women remains extremely weak.

A wealth of research results, strong in both quality and quantity, indicate promising possibilities to both increase animal production and improve animal health. A lack of communication between veterinary services, research institutes and animal producers and consumers does, however, mean that these research results are not properly utilized.

Weak veterinary extension leaves animal holders without any scientific or technical assistance, which in turn encourages them to rely mainly on traditional methods, without any possibility of improving their animal productivity and health status, or adopting innovations proposed by research.

Given the OIE's definition of Veterinary Services as a broad entity comprising not only the Veterinary Authority, but all governmental and non-governmental players involved in the implementation of animal health and welfare standards and guidelines, it is highly important for the Veterinary Authority —i.e. the "official veterinary services"— to be aware of and involved in all extension-related activities in their field of expertise. The involvement of the Veterinary Authority in extension activities related to their mandate should consequently be considered as a means of supporting the implementation of public and private components of Veterinary Service policies and thus helping countries to comply with international standards.

Key words: *agricultural extension – Middle East – veterinary extension – Veterinary Services*

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1. Introduction

Extension activities relating to the activities of the Veterinary Services are often part of the broader spectrum of agricultural extension programmes, i.e. “a service or system which assists farm people, through educational procedures, in improving farming methods and techniques, increasing production efficiency and income, bettering their levels of living and lifting the social and educational standards of rural life” [1]. Whilst these activities do embed a series of communicative interventions, they must clearly be differentiated from the concept of strategic communication for Veterinary Services as stated by the OIE *Terrestrial Animal Health Code*, i.e. “the discipline of informing, guiding and motivating individual, institutional and public groups, ideally on the basis of interactive exchanges, about any issue under the competence of the Veterinary Services” [2].

Veterinary medicine extension programmes are the link between the veterinary education establishments (VEEs), research institutes, farm advisors, practicing veterinarians, and animal producers. Veterinary extension provides teaching, service programmes and the dissemination of information and research results on disease prevention, the quality of products of animal origin, biotechnology, good practices in food safety and animal welfare.

Extension is an important tool in achieving changes in animal production, which has been created and recreated, adopted and developed over the centuries. Organisations and personnel engaged in veterinary extension encompass a diverse range of socially recognized and legitimate activities seeking to widen and improve the abilities of farmers and professionals by adopting more appropriate, and often new, practices and innovations adapted to changing situations and needs.

Veterinary extension is the right tool for the dissemination and application of research results in order to improve animal production and health, including food safety.

2. Veterinary extension situation in the Middle East

Veterinary extension in the Middle East countries represents a small part of agricultural extension and is generally the responsibility of the Ministry of Agriculture. Agricultural extension —veterinary extension included— occupies a low position on the Ministry’s list of priorities. The resources allocated to agricultural extension, including veterinary extension, are very low and do not exceed 3% of the Ministry of Agriculture’s total budget. Veterinary extension is often left to be dealt with by other institutions. In Iraq, there is a general commission for training and agricultural extension. All interested parties —including the Dean of the Agriculture Faculty— sit on its administrative board, with the exception of the Veterinary Services.

Veterinary extension is usually not independent. It is headed by non-veterinarians and separate from Veterinary Services. This makes veterinary extension appear to be a secondary activity of agricultural extension. This situation makes Veterinary Services unable to plan and execute their own extension programmes. The only country in which veterinary extension programmes hold an independent legal identity is Sudan, where there is a Veterinary Extension Directorate under the authority of the Ministry of Animal Resources and Fisheries.

Veterinary Services focus on controlling animal disease programmes (vaccination programmes, diagnosis of diseases and veterinary quarantine, amongst others), without giving veterinary extension the attention it requires. This may be due to infrastructure and the fact that tasks are delegated to Veterinary Services. Syria, as an example, has 1 047 Agricultural Extension Units covering the whole country. Among its staff, there are more than 600 veterinarians working on vaccination programmes, the diagnosis of diseases and diseases control, but with very limited veterinary extension activities.

In April 2010, the Arab Center for the Studies of Arid Zones and Dry Lands (ACSAD) organised in Damascus, Syria, the First Conference on Agricultural Extension in the Arab Countries. The resulting country reports, presentations and discussions clearly indicated that agricultural extension in general, and veterinary extension in particular, are very weak, with limited available resources. What also emerged is that there is little cooperation and communication with research institutions. Also clear was that regional cooperation is lacking.

Most of the countries have insufficient numbers of qualified and experienced veterinary extension officers. This is caused by different reasons and those reasons tend to vary from one country to

another. However, in general, the shortage of (structural, financial and human) resources, the absence of VEE in some countries and non-adapted curricula are mainly responsible. VEEs fail to give much attention to veterinary extension teaching and there is a lack, or absence, of training institutions. This problem leads to a dearth of qualified and capable veterinary extension officers, and limited practical experience for interacting effectively with animal producers and consumers. Through Agricultural Research and its extension authority, Yemen has established a centre for training extension agents.

Animal holders in the region are mostly uneducated and are still governed by traditions and habits. They are still raising animals using traditional methods and practices which have been in use for centuries; they need special attention and treatment by qualified extension agents able to convince them to change their practices and to adopt new technologies and practices to increase their productivity and livelihood. Most of the countries have on-going projects aimed at developing rural areas, especially targeting women. Animal production development is part of these projects.

Veterinary extension faces many problems due to weaknesses in and/or an absence of effective extension services. No well-defined programmes exist that contribute to establishing animal production and animal health programmes intended to control animal diseases and improve food safety standards. Manuals and guidelines designed for basic training in veterinary extension methodologies should be prepared, despite successful personal initiatives having been established by some veterinarians.

Dialogue and cooperation between veterinary services, research institutes, and animal producers are limited and insufficient. This leads to a wealth of quality results, which indicate the potential to increase animal production and health, going unused.

The production and distribution of veterinary extension materials, such as posters, television or radio programmes and leaflets amongst others, are on the whole limited. However, in cases of crisis —avian influenza, swine influenza and Rift Valley fever, for example— the huge generation of excellent extension materials, which was a reaction to public concern for and fear of the diseases, proved that veterinary extension can indeed be improved. Agricultural fairs and similar events do nevertheless provide a good space for veterinary services to act effectively. What was noted was that veterinary issues contribute to 25% to 35% of the activities at such events.

All countries have established electronic websites and special TV programmes on which it is possible to find information relating to agricultural extension. Egypt has a plan to use mobile phone SMS and a special TV channel in the delivery of extension messages. Sudan is also planning to use SMS for the same purpose.

Veterinarian associations do exist in some countries, but not in others. These associations contribute effectively to veterinary extension activities through seminars, training workshops and publications, although their activities are directed towards veterinarians and veterinary technicians in general, with only modest coordination with NGOs and farmers.

The private sector and other associations contribute very little to extension activities. Moreover, NGOs are, in general, still not effective in the region; their impact remains limited.

Regional cooperation in the field of veterinary extension is modest or absent, and there is no exchange of information or extension material. Regional organisations —such as the ACSAD and the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development (AOAD)— have nevertheless recently tried to establish cooperation, whilst some international and regional organisations include veterinary extension as an important component of the technical assistance projects being implemented in the region.

3. Strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of the extension programmes in the Middle East

Having analysed the status of veterinary extension activities in the Middle East, the strengths and weaknesses within the region can be highlighted in order to identify the opportunities that the region has for increasing its extension programmes.

3.1. Strengths

- Availability of veterinarians in most of the Middle East countries. These veterinarians can perform their job if they undertake specific training.
- Financial resources can be made available in most of the countries, if distribution of these resources is reconsidered to take veterinary extension into account.
- Growing public interest in and awareness of the importance and impact of zoonosis and other animal diseases, including for food safety, as well as the role that can be played by veterinary services and extension bodies.
- The increasing number of VEEs and training institutions in the region can supply the veterinary services with the required numbers of veterinarians.
- The growing role and strength of NGOs and the private sector in the Middle East countries.
- The efforts of some regional and international organisations, such as FAO, which have incorporated veterinary extension as a component of their technical assistance projects.
- The increasing demand for food safety in foods of animal origin and the development of quality control standards and procedures.

3.2. Weaknesses

- Few resources are devoted to veterinary extension activities.
- Veterinary extension activities are not independent. They are located under the umbrella of agricultural extension and are separate from Veterinary Services, thus resulting in the unfair distribution of resources and priorities.
- Shortage of training institutions; weak curricula in VEE in terms of veterinary extension; and poor post-graduation training. This lack of training causes a shortage in qualified and competent veterinary extension agents.
- Weakness of NGOs and other organisations.
- Absence of regional cooperation and coordination, despite the fact that regional and international organisations are trying to establish this cooperation.

3.3. Opportunities

- There is great scope for the development of veterinary extension, which includes restructuring the agricultural extension system, taking into account the specialty of veterinary extension.
- By reconsidering the distribution of the extension budget and providing veterinary extension with the necessary resources, the latter will develop and become capable of carrying out the job.
- Successful veterinary extension activities can increase animal productivity and improve the living standards of animal holders by decreasing the impact of animal diseases, improving food safety levels and developing compliance with OIE standards for the improvement of animal health.

4. Conclusion

Veterinary extension in the Middle East region is suffering from a shortage both of resources and qualified and competent extension agents. There is a lack of institutions that are responsible for training qualified veterinary extension agents. Taking into consideration the traditions and habits of animal holders in the region, veterinary extension agents should be provided with the appropriate training.

Ministries of Agriculture do not give due attention to veterinary extension, unless there is a serious crisis such as avian influenza, which means they do not consider extension as a preventive measure, but rather a reaction to public pressure.

Whilst the private sector contributes very little to veterinary extension, it could play a vital role in promoting veterinary extension. Efficient and continuous cooperation between the private sector and Veterinary Services could, therefore, be considered in certain circumstances.

Coordination between Veterinary Services and research centres should be improved. Veterinary Services should play the role of mediator: to disseminate research results to the field and report field problems back to researchers.

Veterinary Services have yet to develop either extension plans or methodology so as to establish a modern extension system. In order to establish successful extension systems, the Veterinary Services should develop well-defined programmes in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders.

References

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