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Report of the APEC Workshop on: “Pandemic Preparedness Risk Communications Workshop”

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**Report of the APEC Workshop on:
“Pandemic Preparedness Risk Communications Workshop”
2-3 May 2006
Da Nang, Viet Nam**

Executive Summary:

An APEC workshop on *Pandemic Preparedness Risk Communications* was held in Da Nang, Viet Nam on 2-3 May 2006, on the margins of the APEC ministerial meeting on Avian and Influenza Pandemics. The workshop, which was organised by Canada, brought together senior communications and public relations experts, as well as officials responsible for risk management from 19 APEC economies. Representatives from international organisations such as the WHO and UNICEF also attended. The purpose of the workshop was to build risk communications capacity, particularly in the developing economies, by providing practical tools to assist in developing national and regional communications strategies. The outcomes of the workshop were reflected as one of the five commitment areas in the Ministerial Action Plan adopted in the subsequent meeting.

The workshop included a variety of sessions that provided both theoretical and practical approaches to developing risk communications. There were also several opportunities for economies to share their domestic experiences, particularly with those APEC members who experienced the challenges of communications during SARS. Participants especially enjoyed the research field visit to the local Da Nang market, which enabled them to test existing communications products (posters developed by the Vietnamese government in cooperation with several international organizations regarding the safe handling of poultry) with local Vietnamese to identify both their perceptions of the communications materials and their knowledge of avian influenza.

Some of the general themes/ideas drawn from the presentations and discussions included:

- Risk communications and coordination as a critical element to building public trust and confidence.
- The importance of engaging citizens and the media early in the communication process.
- Establishing partnership and capacity building with local communities to assist with collecting and disseminating information.
- Recognizing the significance of cultural and socio-economic influences when developing communications strategies.
- Openness, honesty, transparency, planning ahead and making announcements early as key principles for effective communications.
- Political commitment as an essential element to a successful communications strategy.

1. Introduction

In response to heightened international and regional concern regarding outbreaks of avian H5N1 influenza and a potential human influenza pandemic, APEC Leaders endorsed an initiative on *Preparing for and Mitigating an Influenza Pandemic* during the APEC Leaders' Meeting in November 2005. This initiative commits APEC economies to work individually and collectively to prepare, prevent, and respond to an influenza pandemic in close coordination and cooperation with regional and international organizations. Leaders agreed to a number of practical and collective measures, including the need to enhance public and business outreach and risk communications. To assist in meeting these objectives, Canada offered to host a workshop on pandemic preparedness communications on the margins of the APEC Ministerial Meeting on Avian and Influenza Pandemics held in Da Nang, Viet Nam, on May 4-5.

2. Objectives for the Workshop

A critical component of preparedness for an outbreak of pandemic influenza is risk communication: the provision of timely and accurate information to minimize disruption and ensure an effective response to the outbreak. Appropriate risk communication heightens the effectiveness of outbreak preparedness and response, maintains and builds public trust, and minimizes social and economic disruptions. Risk communication prior to and during an outbreak is an enormous challenge: officials need to ensure that information is delivered appropriately, minimizes fear, and reaches all citizens.

Facilitated by Elaine Chatigny, Director General of Communications of the Public Health Agency of Canada, the workshop had two main objectives:

- A. Enhance regional coordination in the area of risk communication, by:
 - reviewing the regional benefits of effective domestic risk communication;
 - identifying gaps where capacity building measures and other forms of assistance are required;
 - building networks among communications personnel within APEC economies;
 - providing a template for information sharing protocols before and during a pandemic; and,
 - developing a list of risk communication specialists throughout the region.
- B. Build risk communication capacity within APEC economies and encourage the development of communications strategies as part of overall pandemic preparedness planning, by:
 - establishing a methodology for strategic risk communications and providing templates and simple tools, such as suggestions for a national communications strategy;
 - providing guidance on identification and interaction with key stakeholders; and,
 - providing guidance on mechanisms to disseminate information before and during a pandemic, including techniques to reach rural populations and marginal groups.

3. Participants in the Workshop

The workshop was intended for senior communications and public relations experts, as well as those responsible for risk management including public health professionals, physicians,

and officials of national governments and Ministries of Health. The workshop was also of interest to other stakeholders such as representatives of the APEC Business Advisory Council, civil society, communications experts from international organizations such as the WHO and other technical experts.

Approximately 60 participants, representing ministries of health and agriculture from 19 economies, attended the workshop. There were also representatives from the WHO and UNICEF.

4. Workshop Sessions:

Introductory remarks were made by Mr. Ian Shugart, from Canada's Health Department and current Chair of the APEC Health Task Force. Participants then spent the next two days of the workshop taking part in six different sessions, a keynote address, a panel discussion and a field trip to Da Nang's market. Presentations were made by representatives of member economies (Australia, Canada, Chinese Taipei, Hong Kong, Thailand, United States, Vietnam) and international organizations (UNICEF, WHO).

A. Session I: Setting the stage – The H5N1 Experience

The speaker for Session I was Dr. Tran Thanh Duong, expert of the General Department of Preventive Medicine at the Ministry of Health of Viet Nam. Dr. Tran Thanh Duong gave an overview of the impact that avian influenza, H5N1, had on Viet Nam, from the perspective of Viet Nam's own experience as well as from a regional point of view. He then explored the impact that human cases have on levels of public concern, and what the political and economic ramifications of human cases of H5N1 have been. Dr. Tran Thanh Duong stressed the fact that the highest political commitment is required in order to face the threat posed by avian influenza. He concluded by underlining the challenges Vietnam is now facing: the bulk of poultry is still raised in backyards; resources and capacity for surveillance are too limited and a vaccine for human protection is still not available.

In the discussion following the presentation, Dr. Tran Thanh Duong described in more detail the reasons for Viet Nam's recent success in curbing the outbreak of avian influenza. Some of the reasons for Viet Nam's success are: political commitment, a strong communication campaign including activities such as the distribution of pamphlets explaining how to protect poultry, free poultry vaccination, full stop on live chicken markets in cities and the establishment of a team at the Ministry of Agriculture who worked closely with partner agencies and international actors. The lessons learned from the SARS outbreak have also helped build capacity and prepare for pandemic control and develop preventive measures.

B. Session II: Concepts of Risk Communications

Susan Mackay, Project Officer for the Communication Programme of the UNICEF East Asia & Pacific Regional Office in Thailand spoke on the concepts of risk communications. Her presentation focused on the key principles of risk communications and how they differ from other traditional forms of public communications. She then demonstrated how these principles relate specifically to avian influenza and pandemic influenza and why "pre-event" communications planning is essential.

The discussions focussed on the sensitivities regarding the timing of releasing information so as not to raise public alarm. Ways to mitigate this are to be open and honest about the information communicated, to build strong relationships of trust with the public, and to

ensure that a plan is in place and that action is taken during an emergency situation. Many lessons were learned from the SARS experience and the WHO guidelines provide a framework for a risk communication plan that can be applied to any infectious disease outbreak. The discussions also highlighted the tension between communicating preventive measures and the ability/capacity of governments to provide such measures to the public (i.e. masks, vaccinations).

C. Keynote Address: Decision Makers as Risk Communicators

This key note address, given by Dr. Paul Gully, Senior Advisor to Dr Margaret Chan, Assistant Director-General- Communicable Diseases at WHO headquarters, explored risk communications as an integral component of effective risk management. Dr. Gully described how decision-makers not only need to consider the science and epidemiology of avian influenza or a pandemic influenza strain, but successful mitigation actions must also be sensitive to how populations perceive the risks and benefits of these decisions. For him, risk communications must absolutely take into account cultural and socio-economic influences in order to have buy-in from the population. A discussion on WHO guidelines ensued, giving an opportunity for Dr. Gully to explain that the guidelines were produced with technical expertise and buy-in from the countries and that they were to be used for rapid response.

D. Session III: Effective Domestic Communications, easy to use research tools

Dr. Jodie Abbatangelo, Behavioral Research Scientist at the U.S. Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, presented different research tools to be used in the preparation of an effective risk communication campaign. Defining your stakeholders and understanding their needs, wants and desires is at the core of good risk communications, a step that is often overlooked due to limited time, capacity, and resources. An equally important aspect of good planning is evaluation – making sure you are reaching the measurable objectives you set out to achieve. The session given by Dr. Abbatangelo looked at the many ways you can gather the critical insights upon which the success of your plan will depend. She shared existing research, as well as simple strategies and tools to better know your stakeholders, and evaluate whether your plan is having the desired effect.

E. Field trip to the Da Nang Market

The tools presented by Dr. Abbatangelo were then put to use in an organized field trip to the Da Nang market. Questionnaires on avian influenza developed by Dr. Abbatangelo and posters designed by the Vietnamese government in collaboration with UNICEF were provided to participants. The questions were asked to the local people in the market, while posters were shown to determine if the messages were clear and understandable. Translators accompanied the small groups of participants.

It was concluded that respondents, at least those found in the market, had a good understanding of the actual avian influenza situation in Viet Nam. The tools used, the questionnaires and posters, were adapted to the cultural and socio-economic situation of respondents and allowed for good information gathering to help establish a better communication campaign. It was agreed that the questionnaire flowed well, although the use of translators rendered direct interaction with respondents somewhat challenging at times. All participants were satisfied and enjoyed the chance of putting into practice the theories discussed in the workshop.

F. Session IV: Communications Considerations – Building Regional Networks and Regional Cooperation

Session IV of the workshop included presentations from three participants: Dr. Steve Hsu-Sung Kuo, Director of the Centre for Disease Control of Chinese Taipei; Dr. Darika Kingnate, Chief of the Emerging Infectious Diseases Division at the Ministry of Public Health of Thailand; and Dr. Hans Troedsson, Official Representative of the WHO in Viet Nam.

This session focused on understanding the interests of communities, the perceived risks and the use of standards and accepted terms and how they play into risk management communications. Both Dr. Kuo and Dr. Kingnate shared their respective economies' experiences during the SARS outbreak and how they approached risk communication. They both described the importance of preparedness before an actual crisis as governments quickly come under enormous public pressure in case of an outbreak. They both agreed that grass-roots communications and regional networks should also be part of any good communication campaign, as well as developing a good relationship with the mass media as they often represent the best way to reach out to the population. Dr. Troedsson then underscored the importance of regional cooperation and encouraged member economies to explore existing forums for initiatives and to ensure that economies are on par when it comes to engagement, as each faces different situations and possesses different capacities and needs.

It was concluded that key communications professionals and official spokespeople are essential and should receive risk communication training. APEC economies were encouraged to develop communications strategies and build regional communication networks as key components of overall APEC preparedness.

G. Session V: Risk Communications Models for APEC Economies

Without strong communications preparation, there exists the strong possibility of a more rapid spread of disease, inaccurate reporting in the media, public confusion, mistrust of the government, fear, and serious economic and social disruption. Elaine Chatigny, Director General of Communications at the Public Health Agency of Canada, presented on how Canada developed its communication strategy in case of an outbreak of avian influenza or a possible human influenza pandemic and shared the Canadian strategy with participants.

Ms. Chatigny described Canada's approach to risk communication and the model chosen by the government in the development of the strategy. She described how key players were identified, ranging from government to business and industry and how messages were defined. She then explained what mechanisms would be used to disseminate information before and during a pandemic, and who were the various target audiences and stakeholders, such as rural communities and marginal groups, of the strategy. She concluded by describing how focus groups were used to "test" the strategy and how the government's messaging was evolving, following the constant evolution of scientific research on influenza.

H. Discussion Panel: Effective Media Relations During Public Health Emergencies

Session V was followed by a panel discussion on the delivery of effective communications through communications strategies, the integration of communicators into the most senior levels, the use of transparent messages and listening to the public and media concerns.

Neil Branch, Press Advisor to the Australian Government, and Dr. Amy Chiu, Head of the Programme Management and Professional Development Branch at the Centre for Health Protection in Hong Kong, were the speakers.

Neil Branch described how Australia has been very active in doing media launches and has offered background briefings for key journalists. Nonetheless, Mr. Branch felt that more work still had to be done on pre-pandemic communications. Dr. Chiu explained that the lessons learned from the SARS experience helped Hong Kong authorities in their preparedness efforts, especially in relation to the media as they played a major role in shaping perception of risk during SARS. Hong Kong is now following best practices of trust, early announcement, transparency, and better planning in preparation for a potential influenza outbreak. Japan also took the opportunity to share its risk communications approach and how it is trying to build a strong relationship with the media. Japanese authorities are holding regular media briefings in order to develop trust as they consider it to be an essential component of risk communications.

I. Session VI: Communications Tools

For the last session of the workshop, Jodie Grieve, Director for Social Marketing in the Communications Branch of the Department of Health and Aging of Australia, gave a presentation on communications tools drawing on social marketing and risk communications principles and processes. She offered a communications template and a process model for developing nationally appropriate strategies that support international efforts and tools to support a global response to an influenza pandemic. She then described the Australian model, its communications approach, and key findings from prior formative research.

5. Conclusion

Concluding remarks were given by Ian Shugart, who described what he would take away from the workshop by three “Rs”:

Relevance: Relevance has to drive what we are doing. If it isn't relevant, the content of our messages, being to inform the public, to address behaviour or to encourage discussion, will miss targets completely. Our strategies also have to be relevant. During the workshop, mitigating risk perception was described as making the unfamiliar familiar; we have to ensure our strategies will achieve this result. Risk communication also has to be culturally relevant. Every economy attending the workshop has a different culture, a different way of seeing things and our communication strategies have to be sensitive to the differences in language, literacy level, employment level or community structures. Finally, risk communications has to be politically relevant. As government employees, we are following political directives and we have to understand that we all have different political systems and societies, systems that don't always benefit from the same level of trust as others.

Research: It was made clear during the workshop that risk is based on something we don't know and that by learning more about a situation or an issue we lower the risk and address risk perception. This stresses the importance of research, but also of evaluation and lessons learned from experience. It also underscores the value of sharing results and best practices between us, therefore augmenting our knowledge level and mitigating risk. Our political leaders also have to understand that risk communication is a science and an integral part of preparedness efforts for a potential avian or human influenza outbreak. Our leaders have to learn how to use risk communications and provide us with the tools to better prepare them.

Responsiveness: The situation in which we are working is changing rapidly and risk communication has to be responsive and adjust to developments, making the case for an “all

hazards” approach. Risk communications should build capacity, and lessons learned from preparedness efforts should be applied to other situations. Risk communications also has to be responsive to stakeholders’ and partners’ needs and form a coherent message that addresses their questions. Ultimately, we also have to be responsive to our own financial situations and ensure that money is made available and appropriately allocated for risk communications.

Mr. Shugart concluded the workshop by ensuring participants that a report on what had been discussed during the workshop would be provided to Health Task Force members and to Ministers for the following ministerial meeting in Da Nang. He also stated he would seek support and agreement from the Health Task Force to disseminate the tools and lessons learned from the workshop and make these resources available, not only to all APEC economies, but also to other international organizations and countries who could benefit from the lessons and experiences learned by APEC members.