

Avian Flu and the Media

Discussion hosted by the UN Foundation
Regency Hotel – New York
26 April 2006: 8.15 – 9.30 am

- Host:** Ted Turner, Chairman of UN Foundation
- Chair:** Timothy Wirth, President of UN Foundation
- Speakers:** David Nabarro - UN System Influenza Coordinator
Ann Veneman - Executive Director of UNICEF
Bill Roedy - President of MTV International Networks and leader of Global Media AIDS Initiative
- Present:** Robert Bazell - Chief Health and Science Correspondent, NBC Today,
Christine Gorman - Senior Health Editor, TIME Magazine
Mort Zuckerman - Owner & Editor-in-Chief New York Daily News, US News & World Report, Atlantic Monthly
Bob Brand - Director, Corporate Security Cox Enterprises Inc
Andrea Bernstein - President Special Projects Oxygene
Edie Lederer - AP Chief UN Correspondent
Nancy Shute - Senior Editor for US News & World Report
Thomas Frieden - New York City Health Commissioner
Gro Harlem Brundtland - UNF Board Member
Ruth Cardoso - UNF Board Member
Hisashi Owada - UNF Board Member
Emma Rothschild - UNF Board Member
Andrew Young - UNF Board Member
Rutherford Seydel - Turner Enterprises
Taylor Glover - Turner Enterprises
John J. Ziolkowski - Director Liaison Office for North America Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
Amir Dossal (UNFIP)
Kathy Bushkin and Elizabeth Alexander (UNF)
Susan Markham, Tim Wall and Newton Kanhema (DPI)
Erwin Northoff (UNSIC)

1 Goals of the Breakfast

- To take forward a dialogue with major news organizations, started at the World Economic Forum in Davos in January 2006, on ways in which media can support both responses to avian influenza and and pandemic preparedness;
- To start establishing effective lines of communication between the UN and other public health organizations with major media organizations;
- To understand the media's perspective on challenges and considerations in handling issues with the complexity of avian influenza and with the public safety implications of a human influenza pandemic.

2 Presentations

2.1 The Breakfast was well set up and coordinated by the UN Foundation. **Ted Turner** welcomed his guests and reminded them that in times of emergency the media is crucial in providing key public safety and health information and this was particularly so in regard to avian influenza.

2.2 UN Foundation President **Senator Tim Wirth** who brought board members to the breakfast moderated the discussion. He acknowledged that the UN is the first respondent to global complexities and challenges. Taking SARS as an example, Sen. Wirth said that the World Health Organization helped to stop its spread before it could kill tens of thousands of people, though it still had major economic and social consequences. The UN will play a key role in the event of an avian influenza outbreak – and so will the media. “The purpose of today’s briefing and discussion is to: establish effective lines of communication between the UN and major media organizations and begin a discussion on what your needs are; what challenges you face in the modern 24-7 news cycle; and how the UN can help you leading up to and during a potential pandemic,” said Sen. Wirth.

2.3 **David Nabarro** said that – as with other global health issues – our collective focus is on people first, then on the characteristics of the pathogen(s) threatening them, and then on the institutions whose role it is to protect people by influencing the ways in which they interact with the pathogen(s). On avian and human influenza, he said that the international community (particularly FAO, OIE, WHO, UNICEF, the rest of the UN system and the World Bank) are committed to supporting national efforts for maintaining healthy livestock production systems, ensuring effective epidemic and pandemic surveillance and response, and minimizing the impact of an established pandemic on people’s lives. He spoke of challenges faced by the UN system in communicating threats associated with avian influenza and the potential massive threat to humankind associated with a pandemic. He focused on three in particular:

2.3.1 **Pro-active communication despite the uncertainties**

- Although WHO has indicated that another influenza pandemic will arrive one day, no one is certain when, where and how it will start. A Highly Pathogenic Influenza Virus (HPIV) capable of sustained human-to-human (h-2-h) transmission *could* appear tomorrow, or it will not be with us for years to come. And there is no certainty that the H5N1 is the candidate for the pandemic.
- Given the uncertainty, consistent action by governments to get prepared could prove hard to sustain and maintaining effective public information campaigns may be difficult. The challenge of sustaining preparedness is often faced by those charged with maintaining capacity for disaster response. They consistently seek opportunities to remind the general population about potential risks, actions through which these can be reduced, and to inform about the kinds of preparation being undertaken by national and international authorities on the people’s behalf. They arrange demonstrations and simulations to keep professionals on their toes.
- One approach is to stress that the human race’s defenses against pathogens with pandemic potential are very weak indeed: defenses against pathogens

from the animal kingdom are easily breached, and investing in strong animal health, bio-secure rearing, human health surveillance and response are as important as defenses against missiles and bombs. A focus on maintaining human security, and ways in which both government and civil society contribute to its maintenance, is thoroughly defensible (though there will always be those who rationalize their fear by accusing the messenger of being irresponsible).

2.3.2 A movement, not a programme

- A broad range of institutions, entities and associations – within and outside government, of national and international stature, formally and informally constituted – is already engaged in work on avian influenza and on preparing for a potential pandemic.
- It is self evident that if they work to a common goal through an agreed overall strategy and in ways that are at least harmonious (and ideally synergistic), their contributions will be most effective.
- There is no simple mechanism through which multiple actors can be organized to work in this way (although within the development community many multi-actor partnerships and alliances have been established, both to stimulate more effective action and to take it forward).
- In pandemic preparedness joint effort is critical – discord could result in unnecessary loss of life.
- Rather than an approach characterized by command and control, the best analogy is of a movement in which different groups work toward the same ends and are aligned as if in a magnetic field.
- It is still necessary to identify individuals who will take responsibility for key actions, so that there is some potential for accountability and tracking progress.

2.3.3 Getting ready for a rapid change in pace

- We can imagine some of the shifts in thinking and action that will happen once the media are aware of suspicion about h-2-h transmission of a HPIV. Ideally, previously agreed and tested operating procedures are brought into play. People are assured that international organizations (especially WHO) and their national authorities are focused on checking the rumours and implementing protocols, so that if it is verified, the potential pandemic is quickly contained.
- Governments, commercial entities (such as travel and tourism companies, logistics firms and those in the finance industry), voluntary organizations and the UN system agencies will wish to act in ways that preserve continuity – of staff safety, of critical systems and of the services they are expected to provide. Decisions that have major adverse impacts on livelihoods and critical systems should be avoided, unless they are warranted by strong evidence.
- The media will be engaged to the full, with high intensity coverage, public information, speculation, critiques and expressions of concern about possible outcomes. The balance of early media coverage will impact on the way in which different stakeholders engage in the response.

- How can different stakeholders prepare for the change of pace associated with the start of a pandemic? A starting point is the close engagement of interested media professionals and those who hold critical positions within key organizations (such as WHO or the UN, international and national communicable disease control centres, etc.), so that they are ready to provide accurate and helpful information when the time comes, and when the pace has to change.

2.4 Tim Worth then introduced **Ann Veneman**, Executive Director of UNICEF, reflecting on the importance of her contribution given her previous position (as US Secretary of Agriculture), and the ground-breaking work undertaken by UNICEF in relation to avian influenza and pandemic preparedness. Ms Veneman spoke of the need to concentrate on preventing a pandemic through an intense focus on controlling influenza viruses in animals, particularly H5N1 in the bird population. She indicated how hard it is to reach the owners of backyard birds, even in the US. She described how avian influenza endangers the health of children in particular, as well as women, and the importance of private and voluntary sector engagement in influenza work. Ms Veneman described ways in which UNICEF (as a member of the UN system) is using its experiences with partnerships, its capacity to develop messages, and its ability to work with media to bring information about risks associated with avian influenza to people throughout the world.

2.5 **Bill Roedy**, Vice Chair of MTV Networks, is committed to the marriage between the media and public health. He said that professionals working on influenza are in a **much better position** than he and others were when HIV and AIDS were first diagnosed.

2.5.1 25 years ago the global public health community was in its infancy: it came of age largely in response to HIV and AIDS.

- It took 10 years since HIV and AIDS was diagnosed for UNAIDS to be formed, and 20 years for the UN to convene a General Assembly Special Session on AIDS.
- Because of HIV and AIDS, the world's media are now accustomed to public health messages.
- Thanks to events such as Live Aid in the early 1980s, and many other events since, the world is used to seeing and hearing about major public causes.
- Our ability to communicate is much more advanced than it was 25 years ago. Websites, emails, mobile phones and global TV stations such as CNN, the BBC and even MTV can spread public health information in a way that was impossible then.

2.5.2 Promising initiatives include the **Global Media AIDS Initiative**, otherwise known as the GMAI, and MTV Network's HIV/AIDS prevention and information campaign, **Staying Alive**.

- GMAI was launched in 2004 by the UN Secretary General. Its starting point is that global education is the best way to roll back the HIV pandemic where it is advanced, and stifle it where new foci of infection are developing. One hundred and eleven GMAI members work on joint messaging and prevention campaigns. Cooperation is unrivalled; there is no competition. In

Asia, 14 broadcasters worked on programming for World AIDS Day, 1 December 2005. In October 2005, a new African Broadcast Media Partnership was launched, representing broadcasters from over 20 African countries. From India through Central Asia to Ukraine, media companies are engaged in national HIV and AIDS awareness campaigns.

- Staying Alive has been going since 1998. It produces annual HIV and AIDS programming, websites in 10 languages and Public Service Announcements for many differing cultures and markets around the world.

2.5.3 The following **lessons** have been learnt:

- Audience: Study your audience carefully and know how they can be reached.
- Messages Matter: Make your messages culturally sensitive, blunt and clear cut and put them across unambiguously. Campaigns have failed when the message has been too subtle. Good messaging helps prevention, confronts myths and lowers infection rates.
- Free Programmes: Staying Alive programming goes to broadcasters rights free – no branding, no cost and no strings attached. It reaches 90 percent of the countries worst affected by HIV and AIDS, much more than it would if completely dependent on MTV's channels.
- Engage the highest level decision makers within companies and industries: The GMAI has arranged summits attended by CEOs of major broadcasters.
- Work through partnerships: Competition within markets should not be an issue. In GMAI, direct competitors are working together. Workplace partnerships are also vital in the poorest developing countries.
- Ensure everyone sticks to the messages: In the past, media outlets working on HIV and AIDS have put out messages that directly contradicted rivals' messaging. The result was a confused audience that listened to no one.
- Train and brief journalists: If they don't understand the story, their readers, viewers or listeners won't either.
- Use all media: TV or newspapers is not enough. Campaigns need to work across all traditional media outlets (TV, radio and newspapers, billboards), and also on digital media (internet and mobile phones).
- Make sure Government or NGOs are backing what you do: Otherwise, they will speak out against it and weaken it.

2.5.4 In sum, AIDS experience suggests that **focused, simple messaging**, developed by **committed partners** working in **cooperation** with others, **across media platforms**, with **NGO** and **Government** support, is the way to go.

3 Discussions

3.1 Following opening remarks, there was a wide-ranging discussion and a variety of questions from the attendees.

3.2 **Thomas Frieden** sketched out some of the contingency planning underway locally, stressing that the New York approach is to institute actions that would be useful not only for pandemics but for other health emergencies (“strengthening for breadth”).

3.3 **Gro Harlem Brundtland** stressed that it took years for the international community to learn the lessons of HIV/AIDS, and suggested that unless those concerned with AI apply these lessons, build on their common experiences and are prepared to work together, risks to health will not be reduced. Antiviral medicines and other therapies “will not be enough of a solution”.

3.4 **Christine Gorman** suggested that a mild (1960s style) pandemic will require a response that primarily engages the health sector, but for a severe pandemic all will need to be involved, including faith-based groups and the Red Cross.

3.5 **Emma Rothschild** asked about the situation in Myanmar and whether assistance is getting through. **David Nabarro** described challenges faced by the authorities and people in Indonesia, China, Myanmar, Egypt, Nigeria and trans-Caucasus countries in responding to the threats of avian influenza and a potential human pandemic.

3.6 **Mort Zuckerman** speculated on hospital overload in the event of a pandemic and wondered about the capacity of Federal and State governments to help hospitals prepare for the resource implications of this increased demand.

3.7 **Robert Bazell** was precise in his advice, encouraging all concerned to make sure that messages for policymakers and for the general public are crystal clear. “What are the right messages now, while we have an animal disease? What are the messages to be disseminated when human to human transmission starts, and what needs to be said when we are within an established pandemic?”

3.8 **Tom Frieden** gave some answers, stressing that the messages for the public reflect hygienic practices that all people should follow at all times (“wash your hands after touching people, animals etc, cover your mouth when you cough, stay at home when you are ill”) and other participants appreciated his approach, encouraging better dissemination of the science behind these messages.

3.9 **Nancy Shute** reflected on the communication challenge as new developments unfold and the situation deteriorates: is it better for agencies and authorities to guard information or release it – “hide or tell?”. **David Nabarro** referred to WHO’s communication guidelines. He suggested said that the clear lesson from other situations is that transparency and rapid deployment of validated information is the best policy, but that in cases of uncertainty, those in responsible positions should try to avoid speculation and wait until the facts have been analyzed, checked and confirmed before releasing them. In fast moving situations, it is important that all stick to the same speaking points, and that the specialized international agencies (FAO, OIE and WHO) are used as the gold standard for information.

Andrew Young spoke about one of the challenges faced by the airline industry, in filtering air in airplanes to reduce the likelihood that one infected passenger leads to many others being infected. He encouraged continued dialogue with companies involved in travel and tourism.

4 Conclusions

4.1 Clear messages are needed, but uncertainties must be reflected where they exist. All accepted Bill Roedy's point that the best messages are those that are blunt and clear. But several participants indicated that current public health messages related to risks posed by avian influenza are not so straightforward, in part because the science has not provided the answers. This applies whether messages relate to livestock rearing, poultry consumption or reducing animal-to-human contact. Participants agreed on the need to work together on identifying audiences, establishing local realities, spending time to work out messages that are as simple and clear cut as can be given the science, and disseminating them using all media. Focused support of research, especially in poor countries, was encouraged.

4.2 Outcomes must be tracked so as to ensure that the messages do lead to changed behaviour. "If change does not occur, we need to know why". Experience from Asian countries where messages have been delivered clearly and forcefully suggests that they may not be sufficient by themselves to motivate public behaviour if the local context is not supportive. For example, smallholders in some villages were asked to report sick poultry to authorities but appeared to disregard this advice if they felt that they were likely, as a result, to face economic or social disadvantage.

4.3 Outstanding and difficult policy issues must be made explicit, and properly communicated to decision makers. There are many difficult and unresolved policy issues regarding avian influenza and pandemic preparedness. We need to stimulate more field research, ideally within developing countries.

5 Next Steps

The attendees asked to continue a dialogue with the UN on avian influenza and pandemic preparedness, with a particular focus on ways of engaging senior decision makers, disseminating messages and tracking outcomes. All felt that the GMAI experience needed to be taken into account in the process.