



# AVIAN AND PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

## Communication Technical Assistance by Links Media

### Avian and Pandemic Influenza in Latin America and the Caribbean

Since 2003, a growing number of human cases of the highly pathogenic H5N1 strain of avian influenza have been reported in Asia, Europe, and Africa; most of these cases are believed to have been caused by exposure to infected poultry. If the virus evolves such that it is capable of sustained human-to-human transmission, a pandemic could begin.

The Latin American and Caribbean (LAC) region has not yet experienced any confirmed outbreaks of H5N1 in animals and has not documented any instances of transmission to humans. However, the region is considered to be at increasing risk because of the rate at which the virus could spread and the inadequacy of epidemiological surveillance systems in many LAC countries.

Effective communication is a key component of efforts to reduce the risk of a pandemic or to mitigate its impacts. As recommended by the World Health Organization and the US Agency for International Development (USAID) in preparation for potential outbreaks, LAC countries have adopted a number of interventions, including the development of country-based strategic communication plans that provide sound operating principles for (i) increasing awareness among key target audiences of high-risk behaviors and practical preventive measures and (ii) responding during a pandemic crisis.

All or most LAC countries have developed strategic communication plans, but these plans focus primarily on the pre-pandemic phases that are characterized by a low risk of human avian influenza cases. Further, communication plans in most countries lack a multisectoral approach and have not been adequately operationalized or validated.

### Communication Technical Assistance by Links Media

Links Media provides communication leadership and expertise on behalf of USAID in support of the development and implementation of an avian and pandemic influenza communication strategy for LAC.

During fiscal year (FY) 2007, Links Media, under contract with USAID and working in collaboration with partners in LAC countries, provided technical assistance for the development of several planning and capacity building activities. Our efforts resulted in the elaboration of a number of strategic communication plans; the development of informational and communication materials; and training of journalists, spokespersons, and key stakeholders.

In FY 2008, Links Media will continue to support LAC's development, implementation, and monitoring of strategic communication plans for the pandemic alert phase, which is characterized by little or no human-to-human transmission, and the pandemic phase, during which efficient and sustained transmission of a new influenza virus among humans occurs.

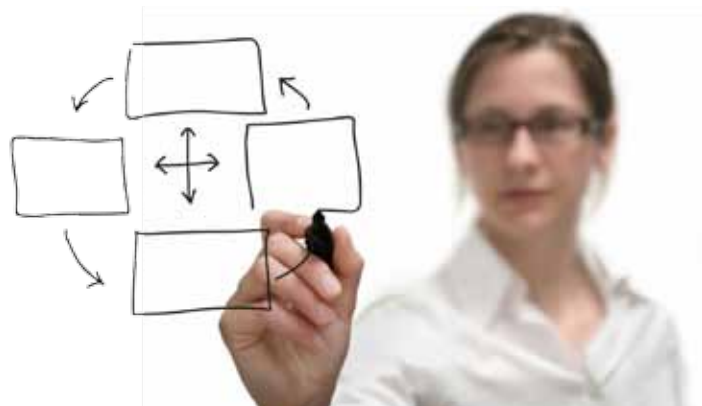
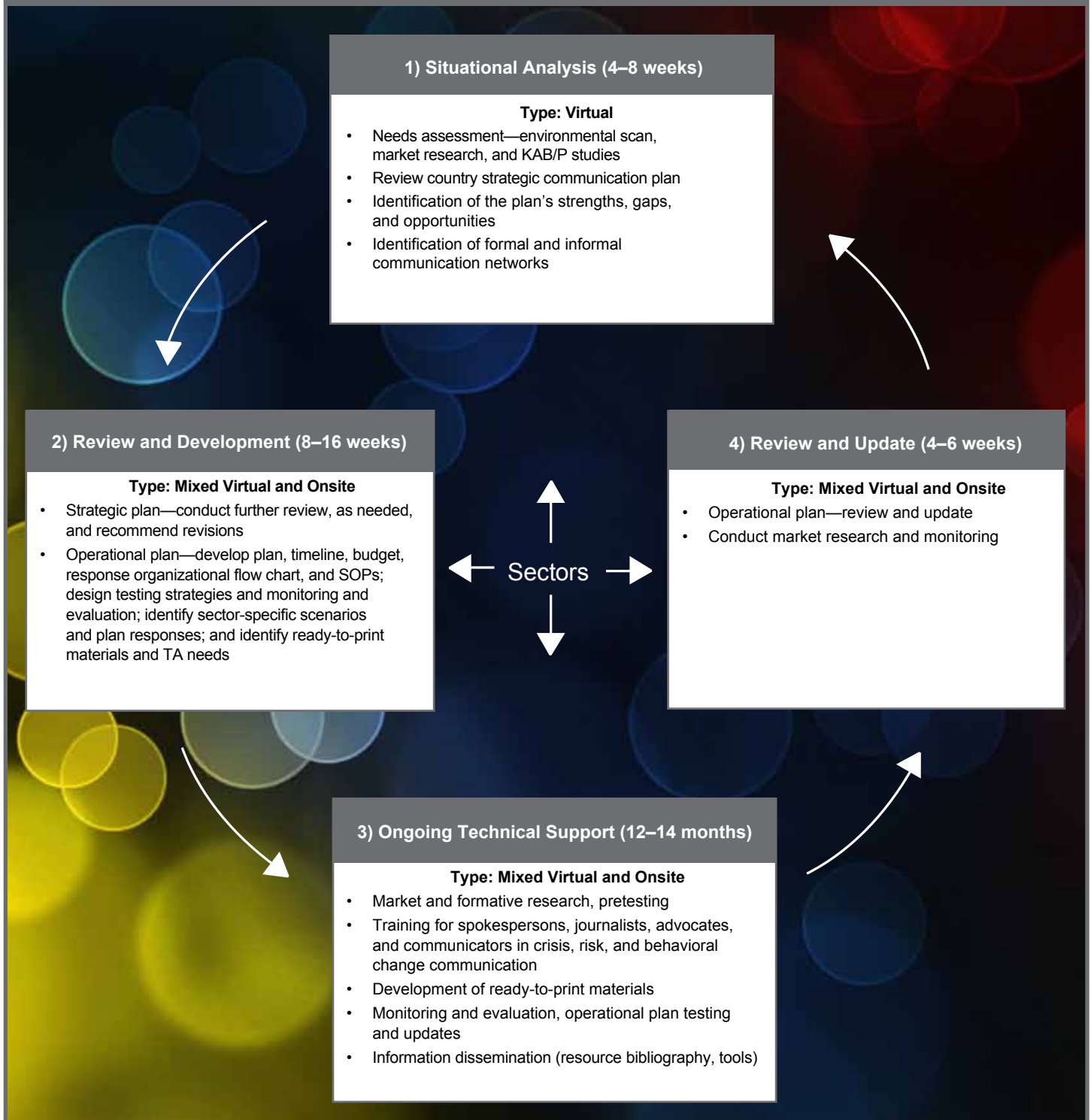


Figure 1. Communication technical assistance working framework. TA, technical assistance; KAB/P, knowledge, attitudes, behavior, and/or perception; SOPs, standard operating procedures. Note: Timeframe varies depending on the country's needs and other factors.



**Figure 1** provides a schematic representation of the working framework for Links Media's 4-step, multisectoral approach to avian and pandemic influenza communication technical assistance in the LAC region. In this flexible, adaptive process, Steps 1 through 4 will be used as needed, tailored to the needs of specific countries. Scenarios inform each step of the process and are explicitly incorporated into the operational plan. All sectors (e.g., health, agriculture, and education), as represented by all levels of government, civil society organizations, and the private sector, are integrated into each step. This process allows us to monitor changes in risk information or in social, political, or environmental conditions and to update our approach as needed.

## Step 1: Situational Analysis

Links Media is working with LAC countries to assess the current status of each country's avian and pandemic influenza communication strategy. We assess the implications of the full spectrum of political, cultural, economic, and environmental factors for the optimal communication strategies of each country and for the LAC region as a whole, taking into account the results of market research as well as knowledge, attitudes, behavior, and/or perception (KAB/P) studies.

Our situational analysis is primarily based on a rapid appraisal instrument—conducted via telephone interviews with USAID mission representatives and government officials—as well as our careful analysis of each country's existing avian and pandemic influenza strategic communication plan. In particular, we identify each plan's strengths, gaps, and opportunities by considering preparedness and response in the context of particular scenarios. We assess the degree to which the plan outlines operating procedures for all relevant sectors and employs key linkages within formal and informal communication networks. Finally, we assess the need for (i) communication materials for use during a pandemic and (ii) capacity building activities that would enable communicators to more effectively respond to the challenges that often arise during and after such a crisis.

## Step 2: Review and Development

Based on the results of our situational analysis, Links Media provides recommendations for the improvement of each country's strategic communication plan. We work remotely and onsite to assist partners in LAC countries in the revision of the strategic communication plan and the development or revision of an operational communication plan.

In operationalizing the communication plan, we work with partners in each LAC country to:

- desarrollar una cronología para las acciones que tal vez se develop timelines for actions that may be required before and during a pandemic;
- determine budgets and potential sources for additional financial resources, if required, to ensure an appropriate response to a pandemic;
- produce flow charts outlining the roles, actions, and the chain of command for communications before and during a pandemic;
- use scenarios to develop national and sector-specific standard operating procedures;
- design effective means of testing the operational plan at various jurisdictional levels;
- design monitoring and evaluation strategies; and
- identify the need for ready-to-print information, education, and communication (IEC) materials and for capacity building activities.



## Step 3: Ongoing Technical Support

Links Media provides remote and onsite technical support to test and refine the operational plan, conduct training, or produce ready-to-print materials. Depending on the needs of each country, we may find that capacity building activities (e.g., training in risk and crisis communication) are required for communicators, education and health promoters, scientific and technical information sources, official spokespersons, journalists, and advocates. We may assist in the development of messages and ready-to-print IEC materials appropriate for a variety of scenarios; if necessary, we may also conduct formative and market research and materials pretesting to ensure the effectiveness of messages. Finally, we may take steps to establish or strengthen formal and informal communication networks and to coordinate information dissemination channels.

## Step 4: Review and Update

Links Media will review and update the operational plan, messages, and materials and will reassess the need for capacity building activities based on the outcome of the research and testing conducted in Step 3 as well as any feedback provided by in-country partners. We may also conduct further market research and monitoring as required. Some situations, such as political transitions or the discovery of new medical scientific information, may necessitate the repetition of earlier steps in the process.

## The Risk is Real—Prepare Now, Communicate Now

Public health experts agree that an influenza pandemic is almost certain to occur, despite the difficulty of predicting its timing and severity. Informed, credible, and compassionate communication is crucial to minimizing human suffering and the loss of life as well as the negative economic impacts of such a crisis.

Links Media provides technical assistance to ensure that health communicators in LAC countries are ready to

communicate effectively about risk reduction now, before a pandemic has begun, and to respond in the midst of a pandemic crisis.

For more information about Links Media's technical assistance for avian and pandemic influenza communication preparedness and response visit our website: [www.aipandemic.org](http://www.aipandemic.org).



Evaluating the emergency response system in Saint Lucia in the face of an influenza pandemic.



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