

## Effective control and prevention of bird flu

**T**he Asian poultry industry, consisting largely of cottage enterprises and SMEs, has demonstrated rapid growth. It provides protein-rich food, household livelihoods, and employment to millions of families in rural areas in the region. The current challenges are low productivity and ensuring food safety, especially involving the incidence of transboundary animal diseases such as the highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) (commonly known as avian or bird flu). Recent outbreaks of HPAI caused by viruses of the H5N1 subtype in Asia and elsewhere have had wide-ranging social and economic impacts such as high mortality rates in affected flocks, with additional losses due to culling, loss of income to poultry farmers and traders, and market shock due to consumer health concerns. However, it is human health, particularly the specter of an influenza pandemic, that has drawn world attention to bird flu. Experts emphasize that the most important element in addressing the threat of a human influenza pandemic is to control bird flu, especially HPAI in poultry, thus limiting human exposure to the virus.

The APO organized a study meeting to review recent developments in disease control and prevention in the poultry sector, discuss how to improve poultry disease control and prevention systems, and formulate plans for member countries to avoid mass poultry outbreaks. The meeting was held in Iran, 16–21 December 2006. The Ministry of Jihad-e-Agriculture and National Iranian Productivity Center implemented the program. Twenty participants from eight member countries and several observers from the host country attended.

Experts deliberated at length on the current poultry sector, and a site visit was

made to an automated poultry farm in Karaj, among other facilities. The experts noted that although HPAI outbreaks have been reported in many member countries, only a few have plans in place in the event of an avian influenza pandemic. In syndicate discussions, working groups identified salient issues in improving national disease control and prevention systems and proposed concrete actions, including:

1. Countries must have plans to deal with HPAI in the event of a pandemic.
2. Surveillance systems need to be developed and/or strengthened to detect HPAI outbreaks at source. Early recognition and reporting mechanisms should be established as soon as possible.
3. Common diagnostic standards for HPAI should be harmonized, national quarantine systems improved, and appropriate compensation and/or insurance for poultry producers developed.
4. Quality vaccines that meet the minimum international standards and strategic plans for vaccination of large flocks are needed.
5. Communicating reliable information in a timely fashion is needed to manage public anxiety over what some fear could become a pandemic if the virus mutates into a variant that could cause large-scale human deaths.
6. Increased cooperation among regional governments through networks for the surveillance, diagnosis, and monitoring of poultry disease in Asia is recommended.
7. Human and avian influenza diagnostic laboratories at the national and regional levels with close coordination among them is one method to make rapid test validation results available regionwide. 