



Improving communications for antimicrobial resistance (AMR) in Africa: How should we move forward?

About this online discussion

This document summarizes the online discussion *Improving communications for Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) in Africa: How should we move forward?* held on the FAO Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN Forum) from 2 to 30 June 2020. The discussion was facilitated by Scott Newman of FAO's Regional Office for Africa in Accra, Ghana.

The emergence and spread of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) through the misuse of antimicrobial drugs is complicating the management of many infectious diseases, thus endangering animal health and welfare as well as food production. The complexity of the AMR crisis and antimicrobial pollution requires a coordinated and integrated approach that brings together the sectors of public and animal health, agricultural production and environmental management.

This online discussion invited participants to exchange ideas and discuss how to improve the communication about AMR and involve the necessary stakeholders, thus ensuring that this important issue becomes a top priority in national and regional development agendas. The outcomes of this discussion have helped inform the Africa AMR Communications and Advocacy Strategy that is currently under development by the Regional Tripartite (FAO, OIE, WHO) and the African Union (Africa CDC and AU-IBAR).

Over the four weeks of discussion, participants shared 37 contributions. The topic introduction and the discussion questions proposed, as well as the contributions received, are available on the discussion page: www.fao.org/fsnforum/activities/discussions/AMR

1. What is the biggest communication challenge related to AMR and inappropriate antimicrobial use (AMU) in Africa?

Discussion participants largely agreed that one of the key challenges in communicating effectively about the risks associated with AMR is that stakeholders find it difficult to relate to the problem. Farmers don't consider AMR to be

part of their lived experience, and thus feel no need to take precautions, while governments do not consider it a priority either (Yinka Somorin).

Not having personally seen any of the negative effects of AMR, many farmers remain oblivious to the risks of inappropriate AMU. Even when they are aware of these, they don't want to risk any potential loss of revenue from a reduction in antimicrobial use (Dooshima Kwange).

Farmers are primarily concerned with their economic well-being and therefore welcome any practice that they feel can protect their livelihood, including the misuse of antimicrobial drugs. The relative ease with which antimicrobial drugs can be accessed also adds to the problem, as this encourages them to be applied too liberally. In some countries these drugs are legally treated as agricultural inputs rather than medical remedies (Japhta Mokoete), making it easier for them to be used incorrectly (Diana Gahn-Smith).

In this context it was argued that the lack of formal education plays a big role in making it more difficult to inform farmers about the potential pitfalls of an overreliance on antimicrobials and the negative long-term effects that AMR will have on their livelihoods (Kingsley Pereko, Malik Olatunde Oduoye).

Hence, participants unanimously highlighted the need to make communications about AMR relatable to those most affected by it, in order to drive the message home and make it easier to understand. The threat of AMR needs to be strongly emphasized and communicated as a problem of high urgency (Chioma Achi, Japhta Mokoete, Adebayo Depo, Saad Uakkas).

The inefficiency of many current communication efforts is exacerbated by the fragmented institutional landscape in many least developed countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Having separate ministries for agriculture, livestock, fisheries and forests makes cooperation between them difficult, and can even lead to the dissemination of conflicting information (Ernest Molua, Samira Sarter).

All this is exacerbated by the inherent difficulty of translating technical, biological and medical concepts into simple statements that can be understood easily by people with little formal education (Irene Ouoba). This is especially true as this information is often generated and made available in languages that are not native to the particular area of focus and which farmers might not fully master (James Sakala Siamate).

2. What is the best approach to communicate about other antimicrobials (antifungal, antiparasitic, antiviral, pesticides), and not only antibiotics? As viruses, fungi and parasites can also be resistant to medicines commonly used to treat them, thus impacting health and food systems, how do we communicate about these issues in addition to antibiotic resistant bacteria?

To address the challenges mentioned above, participants argued that the one-size-fits-all approach does not work in all contexts, and there is hence the need to utilize different communication strategies to capture the attention of different groups of stakeholders (Abdulkareem Zainab). Nevertheless, a series of suggestions were also shared on how AMR communication could be made more effective in general:

Keep the message simple

Messages used to raise awareness on AMR need to be simple and accessible. Keeping technical language to a minimum and using real-life examples will help people internalize the messages (Mabel Aworh-Ajumobi).

Consistently use the term antimicrobial resistance (AMR)

To avoid confusing the audience and diluting the message, it was argued by participants that the term AMR should be consistently used. Rather than splitting communication efforts

along different categories of antimicrobial drugs (antifungal, antibiotics, etc.), using one term to refer to the problems arising from an overuse of any one of these medications would streamline the communication campaigns. Using AMR as a general category would also simplify efforts aimed at making communications less technical and more accessible to rural stakeholders (Irene Ouoba, Huda Tawir).

Make AMR more relatable and tangible as an issue

As stated above, the issues of AMR are often perceived as something abstract, especially when individuals don't know anyone who has experienced any concrete negative effects.

It was hence suggested by multiple contributors to present examples of real people who have suffered losses due to AMR. Examples could also include cases where antimicrobials have been used incorrectly, thus failing to yield the expected benefits while still costing the farmer(s) money (Yesutor Soku, Chioma Achi, Mabel Aworh-Ajumobi).



Target the communication

It is important to design the communication efforts based on their intended audience. This is especially true when it comes to distinguishing between efforts aimed at awareness raising within the general public and those messages addressed to national authorities.

For international and national authorities, an aptly worded description of the problem stressing the necessity of urgent action is needed, while communication aimed at the general public should be simple, focusing on what individuals can do personally and what they should encourage the authorities to address (Lal Manavado).

A number of factors that greatly influence the perception of risk among a particular audience – such as level of awareness, prior knowledge, general attitude to health and safety, behavioural tendencies present in a given community, and socio-cultural differences – are sometimes ignored when attempting to communicate with that audience (Akinlabi Ogunleye, Adebayo Depo). Generic terms (e.g. prudent, judicious, careful) that are often employed to define the proper use of antimicrobials can carry very different meanings and connotations across different cultures (Akinlabi Ogunleye).

Multisectoral collaboration

Participants pointed to the need to build coordinated multi- and intersectoral collaborations, both for the creation as well

as the implementation of AMR communication initiatives (Michael Sagno). A proper coordination mechanism will help bring together relevant actors to provide information and develop strategies on how to address AMR, including effective communication strategies (Diana Gahn-Smith).

Engage journalists

There should be frequent and systematic engagement with media personnel and journalists to help them understand the issue of AMR and provide them with accurate information. A competitive grant-giving system could provide an incentive for journalists to tackle this topic (Abdulkareem Zainab, Abiodun E).

At the same time, it would be crucial to engage in long-term partnerships with relevant media organizations to ensure that AMR stays on their agenda and to develop contextualized and continuous communication campaigns (Michael Sagno).

Physical workshops

While traditional and social media are without doubt an important way to engage stakeholders, participants underscored the continued importance of workshops. These constitute an effective and well-tested method of communication at the field level in many African countries. Getting knowledgeable persons to spend time in physical proximity with stakeholders helps to build trust and facilitates

the sharing of personal experiences, allowing for a seamless integration of question and answer rounds that can help clarify important messages (Yesutor Soku).

Focus group discussions were mentioned as a particularly useful format. These allow experts to present their information while at the same time giving them a sense of existing options, priorities and practices which can help in adapting their communication approach (Abdulkareem Zainab).

Link the communication clearly to the desired behaviour change

One pitfall to avoid is focusing too much on the communication side of things, and thus losing sight of the end goal: namely, behaviour change (Abiodun E). Therefore, it needs to be clear from the very beginning what the communication efforts aim to achieve and what the stakeholders are expected to do once they are properly informed on the issue (Lal Manavado).

Despite an increase in communication about AMR, behaviour change often remains elusive as efforts are not always systematically followed up on through active engagement with stakeholders and their local contexts. It is for instance not enough to place posters in strategic places or to share pamphlets if these efforts are not accompanied by appropriate engagement strategies (Chioma Achi).

It is important to keep in mind that most people who misuse or abuse antimicrobials are not aware that they are doing anything bad, but rather feel they are employing a tool at their disposal that can make their lives easier. Hence, messages

on the proper use of antimicrobials should be as simple as possible so that people understand the concrete dangers of inappropriate usage, as well as the correct alternatives (Mabel Aworh-Ajumobi). It should be very clear that the intent is not to demonize antimicrobial drugs or to discourage their use completely; rather, the messages should stress that these drugs can be an important tool when used properly and only when necessary (Chioma Achi, Temitope Alao-Sanni).

Ensure communication in the local language

A multitude of participants stressed that in order to properly reach farmers at the grassroots level it is indispensable to communicate in the local language. Clear and concise messages on AMR in various local languages can be disseminated through local radio and television networks, thus increasing the likelihood of uptake (Chioma Achi, Malik Olatunde Oduoye, Abiodun E, Saad Uakkas). The same is true for booklets and small pamphlets used to inform dialogues at the local level (James Sakala Siamate).

Engage extension workers

Agricultural extension workers also have a very important role in communicating AMR-related information. Extension workers' contacts with farmers at the grassroots level and experience with local contexts can help deliver information in a way relevant to particular communities. For this to happen, it is of great importance that extension workers are trained on AMR issues and given the necessary tools to present the information effectively (Akinlabi Ogunleye, Yinka Somorin).

3. How can we get the topic of AMR included more often in the media? How do we ensure the visibility of AMR among other “hot topics”?

Participants observed that media organizations in general are not interested in a topic unless it gains the attention of their target audience or readership. It is therefore necessary to work on awareness-raising efforts in parallel with developing media strategies, so that the media get the sense that the issue is a problem of interest. It was also suggested that a certain level of repetition is necessary before a topic is taken seriously by both the media and audiences (Ramatou Moumouni).

Taking advantage of already existing initiatives such as World Antibiotic Awareness Week (Now changed to World Antimicrobial Awareness Week) could increase visibility for the topic across different media categories (Saad Uakkas, Kingsley Pereko). In order to enlist the participation of commercial media, it could also be helpful to offer monetary and non-monetary incentives (Huda Tawir).



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4. What communication channels, methods or mechanisms are more suitable and will have the greatest impact at field level in African countries?

Participants highlighted the need to make use of both traditional and modern media. While social media was identified as an effective tool to reach out to the younger generation of farmers and health workers and to connect with food consumers, traditional communication channels, especially radio programming, were suggested as an effective way to reach people in more remote rural areas.

Social media

Taking advantage of social media channels to disseminate information and engage stakeholders is of paramount importance (Malik Olatunde Oduoye, Japhta Mokoete, Abiodun E, Adebayo Depo). Here it is however very important to carefully assess which social media channels are used by the target audiences, keeping in mind that this can vary substantially across countries and age groups (Saad Uakkas). For example, online marketing platforms used by farmers to sell and acquire goods are an important place to post AMR information (Eliza Smith).

Strong presence of the topic on social media has the added benefit that traditional media are more likely to take notice of the issue (Ibrahima Kouma).

Storytelling

Storytelling was mentioned as a powerful tool to achieve behaviour change. Without any first-hand evidence of the detrimental effects of AMR, it is harder for stakeholders to get invested in it as a problem to address. Real-life stories of individuals who have endured hardships due to AMR will make messages much more relatable. When properly formulated, these can also be presented as success stories which can be engrossing and motivational (Mabel Aworh-Ajumobi).

Educational curricula

AMR should be included in educational curricula at all levels. Seminars should be held at regular intervals for the teachers as well in order to give them a better understanding of the issue, allowing them to convey information without the need to rely on external experts (Malik Olatunde Oduoye, James Sakala Siamate).

Interpersonal communication channels

Efforts to introduce AMR-related messages into existing group activities, such as theatre groups or youth organizations,

should be considered especially when it comes to raising the awareness of youth. Such efforts can have the additional benefit of making youth a part of the communication efforts, thus increasing ownership of the information and potentially the uptake by the whole community (Abiodun E, Malik Olatunde Oduoye).

Visual communication

Producing publications such as posters, infographics and videos in the local language and using simple words can help make messages accessible and more interesting (Saad Uakkas). Participants also mentioned comics as an additional effective way to convey messages through storytelling (Ibrahima Kouma).

Traditional institutions

To ensure engagement with local stakeholders and to give credibility to AMR communication campaigns, participants underlined the importance of involving local institutions, both official and customary. In many rural areas the authority of traditional or tribal leaders is strong, and therefore these leaders should be involved in meetings with local farmers via local agricultural advisors or state veterinary offices (Japhta Mokoete, Abiodun E, Fernand Boumbandjoka Makandjoka).

Religious leaders should also be involved as they are trusted by their communities and can be instrumental in adapting messages to a style that resonates with a particular community (Abiodun E, Fernand Boumbandjoka Makandjoka, Kingsley Pereko, Malik Olatunde Oduoye).

Another example of traditional institutions that could help amplify AMR-related messages are town criers. Involving them would help communicate with audiences that are hard to reach through technological means and would also help add a degree of urgency to the message (Adebayo Depo).

One Health

There was consensus among the participants that AMR is not a single-sector issue and that it would be instrumental to make use of cross-cutting, multistakeholder initiatives such as the African Union's One Health approach. This approach considers the health of humans, animals and the environment as closely interrelated, calling for a multisectoral approach in all policies and programmes.

The One Health approach should be the basis for all activities linked to AMR in order to guarantee proper coordination and convergence among the initiatives of the different actors

involved (James Sakala Siamate, Malik Olatunde Oduoye, Akinlabi Ogunleye, Temitope Alao-Sanni, Ibrahima Kouma, Dooshima Kwange, Scott Newman, Yesutor Soku).

5. Which group of stakeholders do you think should be considered a priority for targeted key messages aimed at raising awareness on excessive AMU and AMR?

Farmers

Participants largely agreed that farmers are the key stakeholders that ultimately need to be reached by AMR communication campaigns. Nonetheless, it was noted that farmers who directly use antimicrobials are currently somewhat ignored in AMR communications.

Medical professionals

Another group that needs to be targeted consists of medical professionals and students. In this context, veterinarians and pharmacists should be given particular focus, due to their crucial role in drug prescriptions and sales, which puts them in a unique position to convey information to farmers

(Chioma Achi, Adebayo Depo, Saad Uakkas, Huda Tawir, Diana Gahn-Smith, Yesutor Soku). Antimicrobial stewardship programmes aimed at educating medical personnel to follow evidence-based prescriptions need to be set up in order to stem antibiotic overuse (Manuel Moya, Dolo Yaya).

Feed producers

Feed producers should also be considered priority stakeholders. As producers are somewhat under pressure to ensure that farmers get optimum productivity from their products, they might be compelled to incorporate certain levels of antimicrobials in their feed (Chioma Achi, Irene Ouoba).



Legislators

Legislators are another group who should receive information on AMR. Given the ease of access to antimicrobial drugs, participants felt that lawmakers should be lobbied into pushing forward legislation regulating the distribution of and access to these drugs ([Ibrahima Kouma](#)).

Pharmaceutical companies

Pharmaceutical companies responsible for the manufacturing and distribution of antimicrobials need to be involved in communication efforts, and should also be encouraged to include clear instructions and warnings on the packaging of their products ([Temitope Alao-Sanni](#)).

6. At national, regional and continental levels, who do you think should take leadership and responsibility for awareness and advocacy activities on AMU and AMR?

While participants suggested a variety of actors (see below) to lead AMR-related efforts at different levels, a main priority that emerged was to support coordination between the work of different ministries at the national level and with other organizations. The creation of interministerial task forces on AMR communication involving all ministries associated with agriculture, livestock, environment, trade, health and communication (in addition to government-owned national broadcasting organizations) could contribute to more coordinated and effective communication on the issue ([Ernest Molua](#)).

National level

- ▶ National communication commissions
- ▶ National centres for disease control and prevention
- ▶ Ministries of agriculture and animal resources
- ▶ Ministries of health
- ▶ Ministries of communication
- ▶ Ministries of environment
- ▶ Youth organizations
- ▶ Medical professionals
- ▶ Pharmacists
- ▶ Veterinarians
- ▶ Extension services
- ▶ Country offices of international organizations such as FAO and WHO

- ▶ Civil society organizations
- ▶ Rural development technicians
- ▶ Antimicrobial supply centres

Regional level

- ▶ West African Health Organization (WAHO)
- ▶ West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU)
- ▶ Permanent Interstate Committee for Drought Control in the Sahel (CILSS)
- ▶ Economic Commission on Cattle, Meat and Fish Resources (CEBEVIRHA)
- ▶ Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS)
- ▶ Regional offices of international organizations such as FAO and WHO

Continental level

- ▶ African Union (AU)
- ▶ Africa Centre for Disease Control and Prevention (Africa CDC)
- ▶ Interafrican Bureau for Animal Resources (AU-IBAR)
- ▶ FAO
- ▶ World Health Organization (WHO)
- ▶ World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)

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