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Village animal health workers in Nepal: the pros and cons of developing a National Skills Test

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Background

The Village Animal Health Worker (VAHW) training programme of the United Mission to Nepal (UMN) began in January 1981, and is the longest continuously running programme of its kind in the world. United Mission to Nepal, (UMN), was established in 1954 as the first Christian consortium of its kind. Its objective is to serve the people of Nepal, especially the marginalised in underserved areas, by enabling individuals and communities to secure their basic needs in a sustainable manner through participation in effective and self-reliant Nepali organisations. Approximately 90% of Nepal's population earns their living from farming, and more than half of that is subsistence level farming on farms of less than half a hectare. Livestock are an essential component of the farming system, providing manure for fertiliser and draught power in addition to products for food, cash, and social needs. Twenty eight percent of rural household income is directly from livestock.

In the first 20 years, approximately 2000 VAHWs were trained and approximately 75% of them were still serving their communities three to five years after their training. They provide critical prevention and curative services to poor farmers who are dependent on their livestock for survival, yet have no access to either private or government veterinary services. In 1991, there were 82 veterinarians serving farmers in a country with a human population of 22 million, and

more livestock per hectare of cultivated land than any other country in the world.

Developing a National Skills Test for VAHWs in Nepal

Although widely respected in their communities, the VAHWs trained by UMN had no official recognition or legal registration. Therefore, in relating to the government veterinary offices in terms of referrals, vaccine procurement, or epidemiological control measures, they were disadvantaged and not well utilised. The government also trained VAHWs but even recognition of these VAHWs was variously applied.

In 1997, the first conference in Nepal on the role of the VAHWs and their place in the national animal health care delivery system was held in Kathmandu. Participants included United Mission to Nepal representatives, Department of Livestock Services officials, representatives of the government agency for training certification (Council of Technical Education and Vocational Training – CTEVT), European Union veterinary strengthening programme, village animal health workers, and veterinarians. Participants were unanimous in their support for the role of VAHWs, both those trained by United Mission to Nepal and those trained by the government veterinary service.

Small groups discussed and reached consensus on the role of the VAHW, quality assurance methods, and a list of basic skills that VAHWs should be able to perform. Perhaps

Village Animal Health Workers provide valuable services to those dependent on their livestock



the most difficult issue to resolve was the minimum standard of education required by VAHWs, with the government vets insisting on higher entry-level standards than NGO vets felt was necessary or appropriate.

At the end of the workshop, a resolution was passed which stated that a task force would be set up to carry forth the development of a nationally recognised skills test for all VAHWs under the auspices of CTEVT and with representation from both government and non-government organisations and veterinarians. Networking groups and other working groups were also established, and three further meetings were held in 1998 to carry this forward.

The final outcome of these efforts was the development of a standardised skills test for VAHWs to be administered by the CTEVT. Successfully passing this practical examination allows for the VAHW to be certified by the government and given status as equivalent to a government 'level one' post in the civil service. This has resulted in greater recognition of the contribution of VAHWs.

In current practice, the certification process for UMN-trained VAHWs works as follows:

- VAHWs complete the two-week course. At the completion of the course, the VAHWs and the trainers jointly set goals for the next six months to apply and share their skills with their community.

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- After six months, the trainers meet with the VAHWs to review their work and provide feedback. If at least 80% of the goals have been met by then, the participants receive a certificate for the training course.
- Those who receive this training course certificate will be eligible to take the skills test examination after a minimum of one year's experience.

Most VAHWs return for a four to five-day refresher course preceding the five-day skills test examination. Those passing the skills test examination receive the government CTEVT certificate.

In contrast to the UMN approach to training, the Department of Livestock Services also trained VAHWs but using a 35-day training course. These VAHWs were also required to sit the skills test.

Experiences with application of the National Skills Test for VAHWs

While the development of the VAHW skills test was a great stride forward, there have been problems in the practical application of this. In some cases, the logistics of examinations have been difficult, because many VAHWs live and work in very remote areas where it is difficult to conduct the skills test examinations. In many cases, qualified and experienced VAHWs cannot afford to come to the testing centres or pay for the examination, and the original sponsors who paid for their initial training are not willing, able or available to pay for their subsequent testing.

But by far, the biggest difficulty has been inter-government agency issues. The Department of Livestock Services did not recognise trainees from the UMN programme, despite their certificates, because the training is only two weeks, and the government trainees receive 35 days. The two-week training includes a great deal of hands-on practical training, several hours per day of instruction, quality trainee selection, subsidised funding, and trainers who are both professionally qualified as well as trained in practical teaching techniques. Rather than basing recognition on examination results, or hours of classroom instruction, the Department of Livestock Services has been

quite strict that a VAHW must have 35 days of instruction.

Discussions are still going on, four years later, to resolve these issues. Extending training to 35 days tends to eliminate many qualified trainees who cannot afford to be away from home and farm, not earning income, for such a long time. Furthermore, the cost of the training increases significantly when the number of days is increased.

However, this is still not fully recognised as equivalent to the government-trained VAHWs who pass the same examination but have had 35 days training. There are now plans to add a 15-day animal husbandry and management course so the total number of training days will meet the Department of Livestock Services requirement of 35 days (15-day initial training, 5-day refresher, and 15-day husbandry and management).

Evidence that a two-week training for VAHWs is effective

Since the VAHW skills testing began, a total of 223 people passed out of a total of 381 taking the test, for a national 58.5% pass rate. If we look only at trainees of Animal Health and Consultancy Services (now an independent NGO partner of UMN) that delivers the two-week training, 159 passed out of 251 who took the test, for a pass rate of 63.3%. These results suggest that UMN trainees have acquired skills at least as good as trainees of other programmes, whose composite pass rate was 49.2%.

Conclusions

Government certification and recognition has been seen as an important step in the development of VAHWs. It allows them to play a critical and essential role in national animal health programmes, and extends the reach of veterinary services to those who would otherwise have no access. However, this process has also tended to devalue those who, for whatever reason (such as no access to training centres), have not been able to achieve certification. The certification process of standardising requirements has also raised the selection standards for VAHW trainees. In some ways, this has been a

Being well-trained as a Village Animal Health Worker earned Gyan Maya the respect of her farming neighbours, both male and female



positive step forward. However, it has also eliminated many qualified and committed village people who lack the formal education standards (grade 10) required, which are seldom available to the poor, women, and those in very remote areas.

One very positive outcome has been the recognition for the VAHW training textbook produced by United Mission to Nepal. Many training programmes around the world have requested copies to use in their courses. The original Nepali version has been translated into English to facilitate this. The government of Nepal is also now using United Mission to Nepal's textbook in their own courses.

Certification and recognition of the important role that VAHWs play in livestock health and in poverty alleviation efforts for rural farmers have been positive steps forward that build on the base of good trainee selection, adequate access to medicines for VAHWs, practical training, and sufficient follow-up after training.

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NOTES

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