Veterinary scientists address human illnesses associated with livestock

Delia Grace

For the November 2011 ‘liveSTOCK Exchange’ event at the International Livestock Research Institute (ILRI), Delia Grace, a veterinary epidemiologist, reflects on ILRI’s research in agriculture for human health and nutrition.

‘I first came to ILRI in 2002 to study livestock resistance to trypanocide drugs among livestock keepers in West Africa. We wanted to help farmers change their behaviour so they could still treat their animals but with less development of trypanocide resistance as a result. After three years, I came to ILRI in Nairobi, on joint appointment with Cornell University, to work on food safety research.

Scientists at ILRI had researched links among meat, milk and zoonotic diseases. They had also investigated food safety as a constraint to market access because it was blocking smallholder access to markets, which I found to be an interesting way of thinking about the food safety problem.

The last five years have seen a move from the initial ILRI focus on the links among livestock, human health and nutrition to a more participatory approach that includes other centres within the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR); the centres are coming together to work on fewer and bigger problems and achieving more impact.

‘One of these programs is on agriculture for human health and nutrition, which mostly deals with nutrition and is led by the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI). ILRI is leading a part of the program dealing with diseases, zoonoses and other problems associated with agriculture.

‘There is growing consensus that the health-associated problems of agriculture cannot be solved by human health alone. In the past, the approaches of addressing these problems have been very top down and very mono-sectoral. While space has now opened to bring in agricultural research to bear on problems of human health, we still need to strategize, plan and think and find partnerships to find where our research can be best placed and most effective.'
‘Some of the key issues and problems in this research are Rift Valley fever and emerging diseases. There is also the issue of food safety in informal markets where poor people buy and sell most of their food and where regulation and legislation have failed to have an impact on food safety. Cross-cutting is the whole area of generating evidence, because at the moment, although we know there are many problems related to agriculture and food safety, we are yet to understand the key issues and the small ones and in what circumstances these occur and what can be done about them. Coming up with evidence and new tools to measure and understand these will be a key part of our research.’

Contributed by Delia Grace, Team Leader, Animal health, food safety and zoonoses.

View a video interview:
http://ilriclippings.wordpress.com/tag/livestock/

On 9 and 10 November 2011, the ILRI Board of Trustees hosted a 2-day ‘liveSTOCK Exchange’ to discuss and reflect on livestock research for development.