

International Non-Governmental Organizations

Building Collaboration to Prepare and Respond to Pandemics

Challenge

USAID created an initiative to help developing countries to better respond to a human pandemic. They funded a group of NGOs and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies to create tools and processes to help countries prepare or respond to a public health emergency. In order to help disseminate the information, they planned three regional conferences with representatives from NGOs, National Societies and governments. The 3-day conferences were designed for participants from 7-10 countries in each region to hear experts from WHO, AED, and others to share their work.

Regional conferences were held in northern and southern Africa (Ethiopia and South Africa) and in Southeast Asia (Vietnam). Each conference had roughly 100 participants representing local NGOs, Red Cross/Red Crescent and military and government representatives from various individual countries.

About 12-15 speakers would present at each conference. Participants represented a wide range of backgrounds and expertise in pandemic response. Participants also came from countries with very different capabilities and histories of public health efforts. With 7-10 countries present at each conference and 90-120 participants there was a tremendous range of needs to be served if the conferences were to be successful.

Approach

We designed and facilitated the conferences to emphasize a variety of ways to support the participants in getting what they and their countries needed from the meeting. Participants were seated in country groups or teams. This supported conversation across NGOs, National Societies and others that do not regularly engage with each other as well as helping with language differences. Second, we designed a variety of ways for the participants in these groups to develop questions for presenters and get those out into plenary sessions. Finally, we devoted a good part of each conference to multiple rounds of concurrent, small group sessions where participants could select which sessions to attend and presenters could engage more specifically with particular issues. In the third conference (Vietnam) we took this one step further by asking participants to suggest sessions they would want to host to share information or discuss ideas arising from their experience with SARS and avian influenza outbreaks.

Outcome

The conferences themselves received very favorable reviews with a number of participants making specific comments about how the innovative design aided its effectiveness for them. At this point, the recent H1N1 pandemic is still evolving and it is too early to tell how the preparedness of various developing countries will have been better as a result of this effort. The IFRC and its partners are currently planning an evaluation of the larger pandemic preparedness program's impact.