

Francois Roger: "China, an essential partner for the future emerging disease surveillance network, GREASE"

Along with Southeast Asian countries, China is of strategic importance in terms of animal health. Since 2005, CIRAD has been conducting training and appraisal operations there. To further those operations, China will shortly be joining CIRAD's regional network for the management of emerging epidemiological risks in Southeast Asia (GREASE), which is currently being set up. Interview with François Roger, epidemiologist and Head of the AGIRs research Unit at CIRAD.

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For several years now, CIRAD has been providing training and appraisal services in China in the field of epidemiology, whereas there have not traditionally been any links with the country as regards animal health. Why is this?

François Roger: Disease surveillance in a given country serves to reduce the risk of spread to neighbouring countries or other continents. China combines several emergence risk factors: ecological changes and exceptional human and animal population densities, the latter related to intensive animal production practices. Environmental modifications, cohabitation between man and animals, and increased global trade and urbanization are behind the emergence of diseases that are by nature trans-border, such as SARS, avian influenza, emerging pig diseases, etc. Lastly, the country is a major pathogen "reservoir", and supplies a large part of Southeast Asia with animals (markets, live animal transport, etc). We cannot therefore study diseases in Southeast Asia without including China.

Moreover, China's scientific laboratories are highly skilled in biotechnologies and molecular biology. On the other hand, there is strong demand from them for training in epidemiology, particularly applied, with a view to building their risk surveillance and analysis capacity.

What is CIRAD currently doing in China?

F. R.: In China, both on the continent and in Hong Kong, we provide training, in partnership with SupAgro Montpellier, and appraisals, and are working to establish partnerships, notably through the FAO and the Institut Pasteur. The eventual aim is to set up research projects in the fields of epidemiology and ecology. We are working on a future joint operation with the Institut Pasteur in Hong Kong, on various types of flu, including swine flu. In September and October 2009, we also provided appraisal and support services in the field of vaccination against the H5N1 flu virus. Flu is our main concern, but we are also looking at other animal diseases that may be transmitted to man. In particular, we have a one-year contract with China that commits us to training Chinese epidemiologists.

These operations are enabling us to boost our contacts and strengthen our links with Chinese universities and research centres. The idea, in the medium term, is to help these Chinese partners find their place in a regional network and research projects.

The GREASE regional network for the management of emerging epidemiological risks in Southeast Asia is currently being set up, under the aegis of CIRAD. How will China be associated with it?

F. R.: The GREASE regional network currently comprises Cambodia, Thailand and Vietnam. It is a joint skills network that CIRAD is setting up. China, and then Laos, will be joining it later, as part of a gradual process, and Southeast Asian island countries will eventually be able to join too. Our Chinese partners, notably from the southern provinces bordering on Southeast Asia, will be attending the first regional meetings, in Bangkok, this year. From 2011 onwards, they could be involved in the development of research projects. The network will serve to structure and encourage this, through meetings, workshops and missions. We will also be continuing our work in China, in particular through a one-year epidemiology training plan, which should help develop and strengthen our links with the country.

Interview by Elsa Bru