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Social sciences for animal health: From farmer's perceptions to collective action

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Epidemiologists recently have worked more closely with social scientists. Their objective was to better understand human behavior as a risk factor for disease spread, and to analyze barriers to the effective implementation of control measures. A number of socio-psychology and behavior sciences studies undoubtedly have provided new insights on farmer's behavior.

These studies tend to focus on farmers as individuals, and on cognitive or psychologic factors that may bias their perceptions of risks. However, the next research challenge is to give more attention to the collective dimension of health risks. This encompasses professional, institutional, political and market issues that also structure the way risks are managed by different stakeholders.

From a sociological point of view, animal diseases can be considered as collective risks, and their management can be analyzed through the concept of collective action: action taken together by groups of people, based on common rules and mutual trust, to achieve shared objectives or to defend shared values.

This shift, from individual perceptions to collective action, raises new questions that sociologists can contribute to answer. These questions include the structuration and relationships within and between groups of stakeholders (farmers, veterinarians...) as well the strategies of organizations -sometimes with competing interests- involved in risk management (public authorities, industry...).

Our communication exposes this perspective shift. Based on researches conducted by the authors (especially on avian flu management and antibiotic use in livestock) and a large literature review, it points out the role of factors such as social bonds, market chain organization, shared values, trust in vet services...in framing farmer's risk management strategies.

It concludes on the potential of this shift to renew the collaboration between epidemiologists and social scientists and to explore new paths of health intervention.