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Zoonoses Research Meeting Hosted in Tanzania

On January 24th and 25th, researchers and stakeholders from around the world gathered in Tanzania for the annual grantholders' meeting of the Zoonoses and Emerging Livestock Systems (ZELS) initiative.

ZELS is a joint initiative between the Department for International Development (DfID), RCUK (BBSRC, ESRC, MRC, NERC) and the Defence Science Technology Laboratory (DSTL) and comprises 11 projects involving 19 UK research institutions and more than 30 overseas institutions in 11 countries of Africa and Asia (<http://www.bbsrc.ac.uk/research/international/zels/>).

The meeting was hosted by two of the ZELS projects, the Social, Economic and Environmental Drivers of Zoonoses project, led by Prof. Sarah Cleaveland and Prof. Jo Sharp (University of Glasgow) and the ZooLinK project led by Prof. Eric Fevre (University of Liverpool) and held at the Nelson Mandela African Institution of Science and Technology against the spectacular backdrop of Mt Meru. The Acting Vice-Chancellor Prof. Osmund Kaunde and ZELS co-investigator, Prof. Joram Buza provided the introductions and welcome to the participants.

Over the two days, presentations were given by researchers from each of the ZELS projects, including updates on research into novel schistosome hybrids in Senegal, the genetic diversity of avian influenza viruses in Pakistan, the distribution of tsetse and trypanosomiasis in northern Tanzania, the molecular biology of brucellosis in Tanzania, bovine tuberculosis in Ethiopia, meat-borne enteric pathogens in Tanzania, brucellosis in peri-urban production systems in west Africa, drivers of zoonoses in Tanzania, surveillance for zoonoses in Kenya, zoonoses control in poultry trading and farming systems in Bangladesh, and zoonoses in pig farming systems in Myanmar.

Presentations were also given by the ZELS independent advisory group and funding agencies, providing reflections on progress and thoughts on future directions and opportunities.

A key element of the programme focused around group discussions, involving representatives from funding agencies, members of the advisory group, stakeholders and researchers from across the projects, including all of the ZELS-associated PhD students. These discussions addressed challenges and solutions encountered by the project, advancing interdisciplinarity, stakeholder engagement, and ways to build on common themes and strengthen links across projects.

Several key lessons and insights emerged from these discussions. There was clear recognition of the importance of establishing long-term partnerships among research institutions, policy partners and communities that build trust, provide effective platforms for research and create important pathways for dissemination and translation of research. It was noted that interdisciplinary research still poses challenges, particularly in relation to publishing and securing grant funding for interdisciplinary research. However, the ZELS programme provided many examples of effective interdisciplinary research, with projects involving medical and veterinary researchers, social scientists, economists and mathematical biologists, and with each of the different disciplines providing critical contributions and insights into understanding and controlling zoonotic diseases. As a recurrent theme, the importance of building trust, respect and long-term relationships were highlighted as key elements of successful interdisciplinary partnerships.

The ZELS programme aims to mitigate the problems of zoonotic diseases that affect impoverished communities, and as the projects move into the final phases of the research, increasing attention is being paid to stakeholder engagement. A central theme of this discussion session was the

importance of tailoring messages to key stakeholders in relation to timing, culture, language and stakeholder need, and excellent examples were provided as to how different projects were already effectively engaging with different stakeholders. Representatives from DfID, NGOs and government policy-making institutions also provided valuable practical advice and insights to the ZELS researchers.

Overall, the importance of working together, sharing ideas, communication and creating early links between projects was continually highlighted throughout the meeting. ZELS has clearly established an important platform for interdisciplinary research into zoonotic and livestock diseases that affect some of the poorest communities in the world. By sharing the insights and experiences of the ZELS partners, and by forging new collaborations, the meeting also acted an important catalyst for developing future directions for research into this important group of animal diseases.

Sarah Cleaveland

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