Field Reports

My summer research was conducted in Paris, Geneva and Rome between June 11th and July 30th in the summer of 2008, as planned in my application proposal. During this field trip, I interviewed 22 officials and collected textual/video material in three intergovernmental organizations responsible for avian influenza control, including the OIE, WHO and FAO. This field trip allowed me to obtain first-hand information from officials in charge of avian flu prevention and control projects, which was essential for cultivating my dissertation project. I was able to learn each organization’s roles and perspectives on avian influenza control, to understand how inter-organizational networks were established and maintained, and to investigate the possible reasons for organizational conflicts and consensus in the knowledge processes. Although not all interviews have the same quality, I gathered valuable detail information of organizational activities in response to avian flu, such as the joint surveillance networks, emergence responses to outbreaks, laboratory coordination, vaccination development, and so on. Besides, I also collected documents, mandates, proceedings of previous technical meetings, educational material, communication material and so on through my informants or by visiting the three organizational libraries.

In addition to data collection, this field trip has also extended my network with key informants in the field. Before this summer field trip, I had only a few contacts with
whom I got acquainted at an international conference on avian flu last year. While 
visiting these organizations and conducting interviews, I was introduced to many 
correspondent officers within their home organizations or in other intergovernmental 
organizations. This extension of network has been a great help to explore my research 
sites and will also contribute to my future dissertation ethnography.

Overall my field trip was informative and fruitful. Some of the data collected 
during the trip confirmed my assumptions and expectation about how things worked out 
in international organizations, some evidence suggested unexpected aspects of 
organizations that I did not know before, and some new findings invoke more questions 
to be explored. (See the next section for detail.) Although several key informants were on 
leave or mission trips during summer, what I collected though the trip has provided 
valuable pieces of information to further my dissertation project.

What I learned from my field trip

The field exploration has directed my research inquiries to study how and through 
what processes specialized international agencies coordinate to develop global policies. I 
found that the institutional responses to avian flu outbreaks provide an important and 
interesting case to investigate how international agencies convert disordered knowledge 
into authoritative knowledge and policies given considerable scientific uncertainty and 
inter-organizational and cross-disciplinary contradictions. Multiple specialized 
intergovernmental organizations are currently facing great challenges as they 
simultaneously seek to develop global policies and advance scholarly understanding of 
the emerging and rapidly mutating virus. It is thus empirically and theoretically important
to investigate through what process scientific consensus and policies are manufactured at
the global level, as well as which pieces of information are included and which ones are
sorted out in the process. My preliminary finding is as follows:

1. These three organizations have different goals and responsibilities that are
   bounded by their mandates. OIE is responsible for regulation and standard setting
   (for trade of animal products). WHO is responsible for human health and FAO for
   food security. However, these three organizations differ not only in their
   objectives but also in their distinctive organizational cultures and ways of doing
   things. For example, OIE, due to its relatively small size, is less bureaucratic than
   the other two. However, OIE is more influenced by member states than the other
   two, because all the manuals and regulations passed by OIE should be agreed on
   by the majority of the state representatives. (FAO and WHO can publish
   recommendations and technical reports produced by their technical officials or
   contracted experts.) FAO and WHO have more representatives or regional and
   country offices that could help to respond to disease outbreaks on the ground,
   while OIE has no capacity to do so. These differences help define their roles but
   also create conflicts.

2. I learned from the interviews that many other organizations are also involved in
   either the knowledge production or policy implementation processes, such as the
   World Bank and UNICEF. One particular organization was established to
   coordinate the efforts among different organizations, which is the UN System
   Influenza Coordination. I did not get enough information regarding the extent to
   which the UN coordination office contributes to the scientific knowledge
construction. It seems to play a greater role in distributing resources to organizations than in scientific knowledge production. However, I still think that it might play a crucial role in the policy-developing processes by prioritizing tasks and recommendations from various organizations. (The current coordinator, David Nabarro, once served as an Executive Director at the WHO. Not sure if his personal experience would make health concerns more salient than other concerns, though.)

3. The close connection and cooperation among specified organizations is exceptional, particularly the relationship between WHO and FAO. For example, WHO and FAO started to refer to the other’s reports in their press release. According to one WHO communication officer, this never happened before the avian flu case. So, zoonosis creates a chance for inter-organizational cooperation. (In the past, they had few coordinated networks and little experience working together.)

4. Organizations not only cooperate but also compete with each other. (Organizations are competing for funding/resources. However, most officials I interviewed also stressed that they are all striving for the common good. So, they “believed/claimed” that conflicts could/ought to be solved due to the common goals.)

5. From my interviews, I also found that at times experts from one organization may not agree with those from other organizations. For example, a communication officer of WHO said that the UNCEF often distributes wrong information regarding disease prevention. In addition, several FAO officers emphasized that
their policy recommendations take into consideration the impact of mass culling (as opposed to WHO’s recommendations). (However, even within the FAO, social science perspectives are still mobilized later than veterinary perspectives.) Therefore, questions raised here are where do these disagreements come from? Do they only come from organizational goals, or do they also come from professions and disciplinary perspectives? I believe that all these factors above are shaping organizational viewpoints. The next step would be to identify sources of disagreements and to look at how disagreements are transformed into consensus (or not), and how the transformation process influences the global policies on avian influenza. Through what processes do institutions of policy-advising foster agreements?

6. A few responses regarding the challenges of cooperation. Some of them said that to make two huge organizations (FAO/WHO) work at the same pace takes a lot of negotiation. Or, in their words, it’s a trial-and-error process. Some attribute the difficulties of cooperation to personal traits, others to organizational characteristics. (Further steps may be to identify one or two episodes that illustrate the difficulties in cooperation. I can then investigate the reasons for the problems and the solutions that are proposed. )

7. The “11-month contract” practice and intra-organizational conflicts. Due to the limit of funds or projects, both FAO and WHO are practicing an “11-month contract” with many of their employees. Employees are required to take one month off every year. Usually their contracts will be renewed by finding money from some sources, but this arrangement increases the worries about job security.
According to one official in the WHO, this contract mechanism leads to internal competition among coworkers. You have to demonstrate that your work is important and you are making contribution to secure your next year’s contract. This competition may lead to conflicts and confusion when who should take the responsibility is not clear. (There is also evidence of “structural secrecy” in WHO and FAO, which means the segregation of departments or sectors block the flow of information or limit the chance for individuals to get a more comprehensive picture of the issue.)

8. Economic concerns are also important. FAO and OIE are quite concerned about how avian flu projects influence the livestock industry? When discussing policies, organizations have to take into consideration the policy’s impact on the economy. OIE is often under pressure because states want to protect their national interests.

9. Tasks and their correspondent working units

- Monitoring disease outbreaks: the GLEWS
- Dealing with outbreaks: WHO GIP, FAO CMC.
- Prevention: communication by UNICEF, etc.
- Vaccination development: WHO (vaccines for human), OIE, FAO (vaccines for poultry).

Limitations of the summer filed exploration

1. I was not able to investigate the process of knowledge production. It is still not clear to me the roles that external experts play and the influence they have

2. Minutes not released to the public.
3. A few key officials were on leave.

How do the grant benefit?

These pre-dissertation activities, supported by the Consortium on Law and Values in Health, Environment & the Life Sciences, have been helpful for me to construct interdisciplinary theoretical framework, to nail down my research focuses, and to develop and revise my dissertation proposal.

First of all, the findings confirmed that it is necessary to incorporate theoretical concepts from the sociology of knowledge, organization studies, and science and technology studies to explore knowledge construction processes at the international levels. My dissertation, therefore, will examine knowledge and policy production at various organizational levels: inter-organizational, intra-organizational and individual interactions based on theoretical concepts from these research fields.

Second, I have presented my preliminary findings at the Annual Meetings of the American Sociological Association in August and in a workshop held by the Social Science Research Council in September 2008. By presenting and discussing with participants of these events, I was able to think through my project and clarify what is my study really about, reshaping main research questions that could speak to existing theories.

Third, I am currently writing my preliminary exam paper and prospectus proposal based on the data I gathered and insights I had during the field exploration. I expect to pass my preliminary and prospectus exams by the end of January 2009. Upon passing the exams, I intend to conduct further field research and start writing my dissertation on this same project.