



Improving animal health worldwide is a priority

25/07/2007 By adopting the OIE's Fourth Strategic Plan in May 2005, our Member Countries and Territories confirmed their decision to update our mandate. The OIE was created in 1924 with the aim of controlling the international spread of infectious animal diseases, but now, over and above this original mission, our new mandate is 'to improve animal health worldwide'. This considerably broadens our responsibilities, since not only does it require all our Members to share the same political will, but new institutional and technical mechanisms for preventing and controlling animal diseases will have to be developed at a national, regional and worldwide level.

To succeed, the OIE must now provide policy makers with the right information, arguments and tools for this political will to be exercised effectively and sustainably. These arguments must first and foremost be founded on a qualitative and quantitative evaluation of the political, social and economic benefits to be gained by investing more in new national, regional and worldwide animal health systems.

However, the effectiveness of investments in animal health systems depends on the good governance of the mechanisms intended to implement them. Veterinary Services, including both their public and private sector components, are in the front line when it comes to improving animal health. Increasing their effectiveness depends on the mobilisation of adequate human and financial resources, and on the application of the methods of good governance described in the OIE Code and democratically adopted in the form of international standards by the 170 Members. Good governance requires both legislation and the necessary human and financial resources to apply it.

It is also important to claim that this field of activity qualifies as a 'global public good'. The sudden appearance of new risks to populations and agricultural sectors throughout the world, in an unprecedented context of the globalisation of pathogens and climate change means that investment in animal health mechanisms must be considered a priority.

The prevention and control of zoonoses by implementing OIE standards and guidelines linked to the WTO/SPS Agreement are an essential component of public health policies. An analysis of the current avian influenza crisis is a perfect example of this, but there have been many other similar crises (severe acute respiratory syndrome [SARS], bovine spongiform encephalopathy [BSE], Rift Valley fever, rabies, etc.).

We must also remember the considerable economic and social impact of animal diseases on the rural economy of our Member Countries and Territories.

The animal production industry in rich countries is under constant threat from these diseases. In most cases, and at great expense, they are eradicated, but countries remain at risk from the reintroduction of disease, which causes enormous losses.

Animal production plays a considerable role in the survival of poor rural communities in developing countries. Disease is also a threat for animals raised in these countries, and it is a serious problem for poor communities in rural and peri-urban areas. They are currently incurring severe losses as a result of animal diseases and these losses are on the increase.

It is important to reiterate that the control of animal diseases makes an important contribution to the fight against poverty throughout the world, in terms of both public health and support for the economic and social development of the populations and countries concerned.

This economic approach is also supported by an analysis of the current regional and global flow of trade in animals and animal products. Exports can in some cases offer a precious source of income for developing countries and their rural producers, but for sanitary reasons this outlet is very often closed to them. Effective control of animal diseases in these countries would therefore help to give them access to valuable markets from which they are currently barred as they are not yet able to control or eradicate the most important of these diseases.

Investing in new animal health systems throughout the world thus helps not only to protect countries from natural or bioterrorist threats linked to the reintroduction of infectious animal diseases and zoonoses that they have already succeeded in eliminating, but also to safeguard public health, reduce poverty and open to all the possibility of trading their agricultural products freely with the rest of the world. The OIE will deliver these messages loud and clear wherever they need to be heard. At the same time, we are working with economists to provide policy makers with convincing arguments that are backed up by figures.

By evaluating Veterinary Services' compliance with its quality standards, the OIE can also identify priority areas for investment on behalf of the national Veterinary Services in each Member Country or Territory that so wishes. The ultimate aim is to ensure that veterinary surveillance networks are in place everywhere, since early detection of diseases and an immediate response are the keys to effective prevention and control of natural or intentional animal health disasters.

More than fifty countries are currently being evaluated by experts trained and certified by the OIE. The World Animal Health and Welfare Fund, set up by the OIE in 2004, is dedicated to this evaluation and analysis activity and to providing continuing education in the OIE's five regions for national officials in charge of modernising the Veterinary Services and maintaining relations with the OIE, as well as for relevant private sector representatives.

In carrying out its new mandate, the OIE will also continue to give top priority to its scientific and technical missions relating to the continuous updating of disease control methods.

In addition to providing the communication needed to ensure that these control methods are applied effectively by adequately resourced Veterinary Services everywhere, it is essential to form alliances with intergovernmental organisations such as the WTO, FAO and the WHO and with relevant regional organisations, not forgetting key private sector partners such as organisations of producers, veterinarians, processors, and catering and distribution chains.

Lastly, we must bear in mind that animal health is a crucial factor in ensuring food safety and an essential component of animal welfare. This explains why consumers and animal welfare groups actively support the fulfilment of our new mandate.

There can be no doubt that improving animal health is a global public good: more than 120 countries need help to reach a situation that is satisfactory for them and does not pose a sanitary risk to other countries. This is clearly a highly relevant area for the expression of international solidarity, in the interests of us all.

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