The role of International Organisations in the surveillance and control of epizootic diseases

FOREWORD

The surveillance and control of epizootic diseases depend upon the policies and actions implemented at a local, national, regional and world level.

Inadequacy of the policies and actions implemented at just one of these levels can compromise the effectiveness of the results achieved at the other levels, regardless of their relevance or quality.

Moreover, in our field of activity, policies conducted at the local, national and even regional level cannot be designed and implemented without recourse to a framework and guidelines that have been defined at a world level.

Countries that at great expense have succeeded in eliminating certain epizootic diseases must live with the constant threat of their being reintroduced, a likelihood that is increasingly hard to avoid given this age of globalisation and the risks associated with the threat of bioterrorism, whatever the type of border protection measures employed.

As early as 1924, well before the creation of the United Nations, visionary veterinarians from 28 countries in all five continents created the Office International des Epizooties (OIE), with the aim of building together the necessary world framework for the surveillance and control of epizootic diseases.

Their vision is as valid today as it was 80 years ago. Our predecessors did their utmost to convince the policy-makers of the importance of their recommendations and the need to consider them as a global public good, since the international veterinary community, working single-handed at that time within the framework of the OIE, lacked the necessary financial resources to apply these recommendations throughout the world.

It was not until the 1990s that interest in the work of the OIE began to extend beyond the veterinary community. Recognition by the World Trade Organization (WTO) of OIE standards as the means of safeguarding world trade from risks associated with animal diseases and zoonoses was an event of major importance and provided a new lever to try to convince policy-makers to invest more heavily in the surveillance and control of epizootic diseases, including zoonoses.

The same period was marked by an unprecedented expansion in the movement of people and commodities and the emergence of a media-based global information society, providing a powerful vehicle for new, and sometimes unjustified, health concerns.

In this setting, epizootic diseases have likewise become globalised and mediatised. The crises involving "mad cow disease" (bovine spongiform encephalopathy), foot and mouth disease, severe acute respiratory syndrome (SRAS) and bird flu (avian influenza) flourished in this very fertile soil. If we add to this the climate warming apparently taking place which, for example, has recently enabled bluetongue virus to extend as far as the North Sea, all the ingredients have come together over the past twenty years for the OIE and other International and Regional Organisations concerned with animal health to be recognised at long last as world partners beneficial to the whole of humanity.
Now that the positive role of International Organisations has at last been recognised, what are their priorities, how are their tasks shared out and how do they integrate with the surveillance and control mechanisms at a regional, national and local level?

WORLD ORGANISATIONS

The three World Organisations significantly involved at present are the OIE, now called the World Animal Health Organisation (while still retaining its historic acronym), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO).

World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)

The OIE has a mandate from its 167 Member Countries to improve world animal health, by fulfilling the following missions:

- to ensure transparency in the global animal disease and zoonosis situation;
- to collect, analyse and disseminate scientific veterinary information;
- to provide expertise and encourage international solidarity in the control of animal diseases;
- to safeguard world trade by publishing health standards for international trade in animals and animal products, in particular within its mandate under the WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement);
- to improve the legal framework and resources of national Veterinary Services;
- to provide a better guarantee of the safety of food of animal origin and to promote animal welfare through a science-based approach.

The OIE is the only world organisation dedicated solely to animal health and welfare.

Transparency of the animal health situation in Member Countries is based on their commitment to notify OIE-listed diseases or infections (since 2005, a single list of 98 diseases) and emerging diseases. For its part, the OIE immediately makes the information it receives available to the Member Countries via its alert procedure and information system. The OIE also uses active search systems for non-official information and confronts the governments of the Member Countries concerned with this information, in collaboration with the WHO (for zoonoses) and the FAO.

The effectiveness of these policies depends largely on the surveillance methods used and the capacities of Member Countries’ Veterinary Services. This explains why the OIE publishes standards relating to the surveillance of priority diseases and the quality of the Veterinary Services.

The OIE provides its Member Countries with up-to-date methods for the prevention and control of animal diseases, using data supplied by its worldwide network of excellence comprising 180 Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres. These data relate to diagnostic methods, vaccine quality, animal disease and zoonosis surveillance, control and eradication methods and safe movement of animals and animal products. They serve as a basis for all the standards published by the OIE in the various Codes and Manuals and cover both terrestrial and aquatic animals.
The OIE is responsible for providing health safeguards for world trade in animals and their products based on Member Countries' adoption of standards published in the aforementioned Codes. These standards are designed to protect importing countries from the introduction of pathogens, while avoiding the use of unjustified sanitary barriers to trade. They provide the basis for negotiations between an importing country and an exporting country, and even for the resolution of disputes brought before a WTO 'panel' or group of experts.

In certain cases, Member Countries can request the Director General of the OIE to help them formally resolve their dispute on an amicable basis.

An important outcome of Member Countries' complying with these standards is that they are obliged to increase surveillance, transparency and disease control activities, in particular to gain access to regional and world markets. Other beneficial effects of compliance with these standards include improved animal production performance, a reduction in food safety risks and better public health through the control of zoonoses.

All these missions depend on the existence of good quality national Veterinary Services with the necessary human and financial resources (all Veterinary Services include both public and private sector components and formal mechanisms for collaboration with animal owners).

More than 120 of the 167 Member Countries are still not fully compliant with the quality standards published by the OIE (despite these standards having been unanimously adopted).

Use of these standards by the Veterinary Services facilitates negotiations with their respective governments and stakeholders in the various animal production sectors, in order to undertake the appropriate reforms and if necessary strengthen their resources. It enables the poorest countries to prepare their applications for international aid to help them comply with the OIE's international standards. For example, the World Bank made USD 500 million available during the avian influenza crisis to improve sanitary governance in developing countries, on condition that the beneficiary countries use their investments to enable their Veterinary Services to comply with the OIE's quality standards.

Thus, the application of OIE standards has had a positive, multisectoral impact on disease surveillance and control and on the quality of animal health services. This encourages development finance institutions such as the World Bank to view countries' compliance with these standards as suitable targets, and even priorities, for public and private investment and to influence their government partners in countries seeking international aid to pursue this path.

There is therefore every reason to hope that these welcome developments will eventually lead to a worldwide improvement of national systems of epizootic prevention and control, thanks to the existence of democratically adopted standards which help to raise the world's animal health situation.

The Member Countries have also asked the OIE to become involved in new fields such as food safety, animal welfare and prevention of bioterrorism.

An Agreement was recently signed with the Codex Alimentarius Commission. As a result, the OIE is now responsible for preparing international standards on the safety of food products during the primary production phase. In particular, this includes good farming practices, use of veterinary medicinal products and traceability of live animals.

The Member Countries have also asked the OIE to become the world reference organisation for animal welfare, which has already led to the publication of standards on land and sea transport of animals and on slaughter of animals for human consumption and killing of animals for disease control purposes. The OIE is currently working on a range of topics,
including laboratory animals, control of stray dogs and the promotion of veterinary research and training programmes in this field.

Lastly, the OIE is closely associated (along with the WHO and the FAO) with the work of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). This forum has helped to show that the existence of veterinary networks for rapid detection and early warning and their permanent connection with the OIE information system provide an effective means of countering the threat of animal diseases being used for bioterrorism.

**Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)**

The FAO's core mandate is to fight hunger in the world. The FAO therefore acts as a priority in poor countries.

Its role in terms of the surveillance and control of epizootic diseases lies first and foremost within the framework of promoting animal production, health being seen as a key factor.

There are obvious complementarities and synergies between the OIE and the FAO. This has become more effective thanks to a clarification of their respective missions within the framework of an official Agreement recently ratified by the plenary General Sessions of the two Organisations.

This Agreement is complemented by operational provisions contained in a document entitled "Global Framework for the Progressive Control of Transboundary Diseases" (GF-TADs).

The GF-TADs provides for joint governance mechanisms, in particular at the regional level. Five Regional Steering Committees co-chaired by the OIE and the FAO have been established for the Americas, Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, Africa and the Middle East. They enlist the help of regional organisations involved in animal health, including the European Commission in the case of the "Europe" committee.

These Steering Committees agree on regional policies needed to improve animal health, identify potential synergies and try to avoid duplication of effort.

Their secretariat is provided by the various OIE Regional Representations established in all five continents.

The recent avian influenza crisis has highlighted the need to go even further. To this end, the OIE and FAO have set up, beginning with the continent of Africa, Regional Animal Health Centres which manage teams of experts provided by the two Organisations and placed at the disposal of Member Countries to support them in disease prevention and control.

The FAO also has 80 regional and national representations around the world some of which include animal health specialists. As the OIE only has offices at the regional level, the FAO is in a position to provide direct support at the national level in the poor countries where it is active.

**World Health Organization (WHO)**

The areas of collaboration between the OIE, the FAO and the WHO are essentially concerned with zoonoses. The WHO headquarters in Geneva has a unit dealing with food safety and the control of zoonoses, which has several veterinarians among its staff.

They help the OIE and the FAO to improve the interface between the Veterinary Services and the Public Health Services and to try to develop joint programmes to control specific zoonoses, most notably rabies.
This collaboration was stepped up during the global fight against avian influenza. A world conference on avian influenza and a possible human pandemic was organised jointly by the WHO, FAO and OIE in November 2005. The conference enabled the three Organisations to speak with one voice at last, the OIE and the FAO having previously criticised the WHO for having issued, from the beginning of 2004, warnings without any credible scientific basis about the imminence of a human pandemic. This communication strategy had resulted in decision-makers the world over giving priority to investing in preventive measures against a possible human pandemic rather than in controlling the virus at its source in animals.

To clarify the official mandates of the OIE and the WHO, a new general Agreement, ratified by the General Sessions of the two Organisations, was signed in 2004.

Another Agreement, on the organisation of a Global early warning system (GLEWS) was the subject of a tripartite OIE/FAO/WHO Agreement in 2006. It provides a framework for combining the sanitary information databases of the three Organisations and sets out procedures for transmitting these joint data to the public. It also provides a framework for defining procedures for emergency intervention by the three Organisations in countries experiencing an emergency and requesting support intervention.

The WHO also has a strong network of regional and national representations but these hardly ever include animal health experts. The WHO is associated with the work of the GF-TADs Regional Steering Committees.

It is highly regrettable that, despite the efforts of the OIE and the FAO, the revised WHO International Health Regulations (IHR) do not include specific measures, where zoonoses are concerned, that would enable the appropriate synergies to be developed with other International Organisations and with national Veterinary Services.

This refusal was not on the part of WHO officials but resulted from the attitude the Representatives of Member Countries, who favoured a political and even corporatist approach to an effective technical and pragmatic approach.

Nevertheless, thanks to the willingness to cooperate on the part of WHO officials, the way in which the IHR are applied in Member Countries and the regions will no doubt allow, despite the currently unsuitable legal structure of the IHR, the necessary collaboration to take place between the Veterinary Services and the Public Health Services on the subject of zoonoses, as is starting to occur within the context of the avian influenza crisis.

REGIONAL LEVEL

Each of the OIE's five regions has a Regional Commission bringing together the Member Countries in the region. These Commissions are supported by permanent OIE offices (currently 6; two more will be established at the end of 2006). They are now Regional Organisations in their own right, with a mechanism based on statutory contributions and various voluntary contributions.

In particular, these Commissions have the power to issue recommendations which, after ratification by the General Session of OIE Delegates, come into force.

The main importance of veterinary action at the regional level, conducted through the various organisations working in this field, is to integrate the specificities of each region within the world standards currently in force and to act as a source of proposals to influence the preparation and adoption of future standards.

In all regions of the world there are organisations for economic and even political integration. I shall mention only those involved in animal health.
In Europe, the European Union has the European Commission (EC), which has the power of initiative. The EC's responsibilities include harmonising veterinary legislation and ensuring that the regulations and directives adopted by the 25 (soon to be 27) Member States are applied.

This work has now been completed. It is the only system of its kind anywhere in the world and its relevance and effectiveness should be seen as a model.

Its effectiveness is based particularly on:

- the existence of an inspection service and the possibility of imposing sanctions on Member States that fail to apply the adopted regulations, directives and decisions;
- the existence of community border inspection posts with the required resources and supervised by the Commission;
- the existence of harmonised animal identification systems, health certificates and movement control procedures for animals and animal products;
- the existence of a veterinary fund to finance priority disease surveillance and control programmes on behalf of Member States;
- the existence of permanent arrangements for consultation between the Veterinary Services of Member States and the Commission's services supervising the decisions taken by the Commission within the limits of the powers assigned to it by the various regulations concerned (EC directives and regulations);
- constant respect of OIE standards by the European Council, Commission and Parliament during the preparation of regulations, directives and decisions;
- Member States' compliance with OIE standards when negotiating sanitary certificates for exports to third countries.

The other 25 countries that are not members of the European Union do not have regional support for animal health, with the exception of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). The CIS comprises several countries that were part of the former USSR, and it arranges meetings for the CVOs of these countries for consultation on strategic matters.

The other Regional Organisations in the world take their decisions in the form of resolutions voted by the member countries, or by financing specific regional programmes, but none has the legal authority to ensure that its decisions are enforced. Nevertheless, over the past few years these Organisations have been exerting increasing pressure on countries in matters relating to animal health.

A government's failure to respect OIE standards or the resolutions passed by the Regional Organisations to which they belong may now constitute a political risk for decision-makers in a democratic country.

- In Africa, the most active Organisation is the Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (IBAR), which operates under the auspices of the African Union. IBAR has coordinated a major programme, the Pan-African Programme for the Control of Epizootics (PACE), financed by the European Union. This programme is destined to achieve the final eradication of rinderpest. IBAR works in close collaboration with the OIE and the FAO.
- In the Americas, the most active regional organisation is the Panamerican Health Organization (PAHO), which has strong links with the WHO but also has a mandate to participate in foot and mouth disease control programmes.
In the Americas there are also several other Organisations (Organismo Internacional Régional de Sanidad Agropecuaria [OIRSA], Instituto Interamericano de Cooperación para la Agricultura [IICA], Comité Veterinario Permanente del Mercosur [CVP]) that work together with the FAO on the GF-TADs Regional Steering Committee, the secretariat of which is hosted by the OIE Regional Representation in Buenos Aires.

- In the Asia-Pacific region, the Organisations most heavily involved are the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) for South-East Asia and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) for southern Asia. As their involvement in animal health is recent and limited in extent, it is rather the OIE offices in Tokyo and Bangkok and the FAO Regional Representation in Bangkok which have the role of providing regional support (promotion of information systems, regional control programmes for avian influenza and foot and mouth disease, support for and networking of diagnostic laboratories, support for the Veterinary Services, and training courses for animal health professionals and animal producers).

In the southern Pacific, however, it is the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPS), a politico-economic organisation covering this area which, through its Office in Noumea, New Caledonia, runs effective support programmes for the small island countries of this sub-region.

- In the Middle East, there is currently no regional organisation with a proven track record of involvement in animal health. Here, too, the OIE and FAO Regional Representations take the lead in joint action for countries of the region through activities similar to those mentioned above for Asia.

NATIONAL AND LOCAL LEVEL

While infrastructure at the world and regional level is clearly essential for proper coordination of the policies conducted at the other levels, it can never be stated enough that any breakdown at the national or even local level can jeopardise the safety of the remainder of the regional and global community.

For this reason, policies in support of the quality of the Veterinary Services are essential to ensure the improvement in world animal health for the benefit of us all.

The quality and evaluation standards published by the OIE, and now taken into account by numerous governments and development finance institutions, place special emphasis on the importance of a national chain of command capable of issuing and verifying compliance with the relevant instructions. Indeed, the surveillance and control of epizootic diseases is highly akin to the way an army defends its territory: networking of information sources, early detection and rapid response. This requires a headquarters, decentralised command posts and troops ready for immediate action. Indonesia's inability to control avian influenza can be attributed to the fact that the country's veterinary administration is totally decentralised. The 17,500 islands of widely differing sizes that make up the country do not apply the recommendations issued by the capital, Jakarta, while some governors negotiate their financial support directly with the funding bodies. This is a model that is best avoided.

It should also be noted that the support given to the Veterinary Services by some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) specialising in animal health can make a very useful contribution in many developing countries.

Lastly, we should remember that animal owners have an essential role to play in disease surveillance and control and that any effective Veterinary Service must consider them as
strictly essential partners. In this respect, the French model with its three-pronged approach, comprising the Food Directorate-General (DGAL: Direction générale de l’alimentation)/Departmental Veterinary Service Directorates (DDSV: Directions Départementales des Services Vétérinaires) – veterinary practitioners with a health mandate – Animal Health Groups (GDS: Groupements de Défense Sanitaire)/National Federation of Animal Health Groups (FNGDS: Fédération Nationale des Groupements de Défense Sanitaire), cuts a fine figure.

However, the players and political decision-makers need to be given sound arguments to convince them of the relevance of these mechanisms, and the mechanisms themselves must be consolidated in the face of a permanently fraught climate of competition for public funds and constant economic arbitration between the various sectors.

This explains why the OIE, with the financial support of the World Bank and in technical liaison notably with INRA and the French Development Agency (AFD - Agence Française de Développement), recently launched studies on the following:

- calculating the cost of prevention systems based on a territorial and national network to ensure rapid detection of animal diseases and zoonoses and a rapid response, and comparing the cost to that of major sanitary crises;
- the feasibility of a World Fund to support countries in difficulty, in particular to compensate farmers whose animals have had to be culled;
- the feasibility of a worldwide system of insurance and reinsurance to cover the effects of major animal disease crises.

The results of these studies will, we hope, convince all those involved at a worldwide, regional or national level to maintain, or where appropriate put in place, the surveillance and rapid response systems that are essential for the prevention and control of epizootic diseases.
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