



# RABIES IN ASIA: REGIONAL APPROACH AND PROGRESS

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## SUMMARY

Rabies continues to be endemic in most parts of Asia, causing more than 30,000 human deaths annually and contributing to almost 50% of the estimated global rabies burden each year. Although effective tools for its prevention and control are available, human rabies continues to persist in Asia, where approximately 94% of cases are associated with dog bites. Annually, more than 11 million people also receive post-exposure rabies prophylaxis following a dog bite. Rabies continues to be a challenge in many parts of Asia particularly in areas of poverty, political instability, suboptimal national health and veterinary services, and those where cultural influences impact the societal roles of dogs, their ecology, and interactions with humans.

Despite the challenges, progress continues to be made in the region, particularly in regional cooperation, inter-sectoral collaboration, and addressing rabies at its source through dog vaccination. The Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Rabies Elimination Strategy (ARES) has recently been jointly endorsed by both Health and Agriculture Ministers from ASEAN Member States fostering strong political support. The South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has also come together to initiate a regional coordinated rabies elimination programme. The Regional Offices of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and World Health Organization (WHO) also established a coordination mechanism at the regional level to provide technical support for rabies control or elimination in highly endemic countries. The Regional Vaccine Bank for Asia has also become operational, benefitting the region through its established mechanism for procurement of cost-effective, quality dog rabies vaccines. In the past few years, various rabies initiatives in the region contributed to the improvement of awareness and capacities on practices relevant to rabies elimination, such as mass dog vaccination. The introduction of cost-effective intradermal rabies vaccination in endemic countries helped to improve availability, affordability and accessibility of human rabies vaccine on a sustainable basis. It also helped phase out the production and use of rabies vaccine of nerve-tissue origin, addressing animal welfare issues.

Thus, while the region continues to foresee challenges where rabies is concerned, substantial achievements in the past few years have improved Asia's fighting stance against rabies. It has seen evolved mechanisms and stronger cooperation, now backed by a substantial pool of documented information, methods, materials, and experiences earned throughout the region on which future work can be built as Asia continues to progressively advance its fight against rabies.