



## The OIE's involvement in the field of food safety

**18/02/2005** International standards on food safety are established by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, as stated in the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

For its part, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) is responsible, under the terms of the SPS Agreement and the mandate given to it by its Member Countries, for standards relating to animal health and zoonoses. Since many zoonoses (animal diseases transmissible to humans) can be transmitted to humans through food, OIE standards therefore also apply to animal products that could spread pathogens via international trade.

It has become apparent that the new global concept of implementing sanitary controls "from the stable to the table", aimed at improving the level of consumer protection, requires the OIE and the Codex Alimentarius Commission to work more closely together and collaborate on a permanent basis. This will ensure that the standards issued by the two Organisations cover all potential hazards throughout the food chain and those standards on topics of common interest do not prove to be contradictory for want of coordination.

Moreover, virtually all the official Representatives of the 167 OIE Member Countries (the Delegates), irrespective of the Ministry to which they belong, are the Head of their country's Veterinary Services and are responsible, within the framework of their national duties, for sanitary controls at the animal production (i.e. farm) level and very often for the transport, slaughter and processing of animals. In some countries they are also responsible for controls on products in supermarkets, catering and restaurants. They are also very often responsible for verifying that sanitary requirements are respected at the national level and for preparing sanitary certificates for the export of animals and animal products. In most cases their responsibilities also include the sanitary inspection of animal products imported into their country.

The OIE and the Codex Alimentarius Commission are now working much closer together than in the past to try to develop the synergy needed to ensure better consumer protection through the international standards and guidelines that each Organisation adopts and publishes. In 2001, I had the opportunity to discuss these issues with Mr Tom Billy, the then Chairman of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, and to decide with him to set up a permanent Working Group involving both the Codex Alimentarius Commission and the OIE.

Once the necessary mandate had been obtained from our Member Countries, the Working Group was officially launched in 2002 as the "Working Group on Animal Production Food Safety". Its members include the Chairman and the Secretary of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, the Chairman of the Codex Committee on Meat Hygiene, the Director of the Food Safety Department of the World Health Organization (WHO) and representatives from among the Delegates of OIE Member Countries, most of whom are Heads of the Veterinary Services, from several different continents.

The Working Group's first main role was to help the two Organisations to define more precisely their future policies on the development of standards aimed at protecting consumers, with regard to precautions to be taken throughout the entire "production-to-consumption" continuum. This task, involving both the Codex and the OIE, notably helped to pinpoint areas in which international standards had not yet been prepared and adopted. The Working Group then proposed that the majority of its work should be devoted to identifying measures to be taken at the production level prior to the slaughter of animals for food: for example, how to avoid pathogens that generally have no visible effect on animals being present in food products (*Listeria*, *salmonellae*, *Trichinella*, etc.).

The Working Group is also trying to ensure that there are no inconsistencies or gaps in standards on topics falling within the scope of both our Organisations. This is for example the case with standards relating to antimicrobial resistance. It also takes into account, within the framework of existing OIE standards on food-borne zoonoses (brucellosis, tuberculosis, etc., already dealt with in the Terrestrial Animal Health Code), the elaboration of new standards aimed at strengthening consumer safety with regard to products presenting a risk with respect to these diseases.

All this work will give rise to proposals that will first be examined by the OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Standards Commission before being submitted for adoption to the General Assembly of our Member Countries. However, the scope of the Working Group is not limited to proposing new international standards. It also includes the drafting of guidelines on control procedures throughout the food chain. Within this context the Working Group is currently preparing several documents of particular interest for the application of controls throughout the food chain, namely:

- the preparation of "Guidelines on good farming practices", containing detailed guidelines aimed at protecting consumers from hazards that could adversely affect the safety of end products of animal origin;
- a scoping paper on the role and functionality of the Veterinary Services in food safety throughout the food chain;
- another scoping paper on abattoir inspection procedures for animals and meat, taking into account the duality of objectives of ante- and post-mortem inspection in areas relating both to animal health and public health.

Furthermore the Working Group is invited to consult, whenever necessary, representatives of private sector industries from around the world. All the proceedings of the Working Group are of course brought to the attention of the relevant Committees of the Codex Alimentarius Commission. Every year, the Chairman or the Secretary of the Codex Alimentarius Commission and the Director General of the OIE are invited to address the Member Countries of each other's Organisation. Representatives of the OIE and of the Codex Alimentarius Commission participate in the work of each other's Committees and expert groups of mutual interest. Formal rules regarding the way in which the two Organisations take into account each other's standard-setting work from the earliest stages in its preparation are currently being adopted by the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

The rich diversity of the professional, scientific, administrative and regional backgrounds of the members of the Working Group is a source of inspiration and progress. It nevertheless gives rise to a lengthy process of arbitration before a consensus can be reached, which explains why it may take some time for the Working Group to reach a common position.

There have also been cases where, during the General Assembly of the Codex Alimentarius Commission and the General Assembly of the OIE, the respective Delegations of a given

Member Country have adopted divergent positions, a situation that is hardly conducive to achieving rapid results in the work being carried out jointly by our two Organisations.

It is therefore to be hoped that national consultative mechanisms, involving the Veterinary Services and all the other relevant Administrations and sectors, can be established within the Administrations of all our Member Countries. Such mechanisms could be along the lines of the Working Group established by the OIE with the support of the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

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