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A WORLD WITHOUT FOOT AND MOUTH DISEASE – ROLE AND VISION OF THE OIE AND USE OF COMMUNICATION

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For centuries, foot and mouth disease (FMD) has been a scourge and a threat to the health and welfare of the vast majority of the world's domestic and wild ruminants.

FMD rarely kills, but when animals are infected it affects their production and performance, including their capacity to help farmers in poor countries to produce their crops. Infected countries are deprived of access to international markets, which are the most profitable for poor and rich producers alike.

2009 will be a milestone, since it is the year in which the OIE and FAO, with the support of clear-sighted donors, joined forces to define with all their member countries the strategies that should ultimately lead to worldwide control of FMD.

The objective is ambitious and the task extremely difficult, but the imminent eradication of another scourge (rinderpest) can serve as an example to follow and gives cause for hope.

The task is difficult since 100 countries in the world are still chronically or episodically infected. The OIE applies a stringent procedure for countries to apply for official recognition of their FMD status, culminating in a vote by the General Assembly of its 174 Members. In this way, the OIE has already recognised more than 70 countries as free from FMD, either with or without vaccination. Their FMD free status is the result of major investments, achieved thanks to a partnership between the Veterinary Services and producers. Indeed, this result could not have been achieved without well organised producers and Veterinary Services endowed with proper governance, including suitable legislation, and an organisational structure and human and financial resources that comply with the standards of quality adopted and published by the OIE.

To achieve eradication in a country or region, the problem of the availability of public financial resources is one that must be faced and can only be resolved if the entire international community recognises that FMD control is a global public good, benefitting all populations and all future generations. This is one of the priority objectives of the Asunción Conference.

The Conference will also be looking in detail at the question of what technical strategies should be used. Clearly, there is no need to reinvent the wheel and it makes sense to rely on well-established pillars and on the lessons learned from previous successes, especially:

- good governance, also including public-private partnerships and international support for the poorest countries, Veterinary Services' capacity to undertake communication actions so as to ensure their activities are transparent and to demonstrate the benefits their FMD control projects will bring at the national level.

The OIE, for its part, must communicate the economic and social justification for control programmes and that it is in the interests of FMD free countries to help those countries still infected to eradicate the disease. The OIE must also mobilise its regional offices to coordinate control programmes at the regional and then world level.

- use of good quality vaccination, in line with OIE standards, in infected countries and countries at high risk;

- harmonised strategies to be applied at the regional and not just the national level, based on tried and tested models, such as those in MERCOSUR (PVC) and South-East Asia (SEAFMD).