

# The FAO-OIE-WHO Collaboration

Sharing responsibilities  
and coordinating global activities  
to address health risks at the  
animal-human-ecosystems interfaces

A Tripartite Concept Note



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**VISION**  
**A world capable of preventing, detecting, containing, eliminating, and responding to animal and public health risks attributable to zoonoses and animal diseases with an impact on food security through multi-sectoral cooperation and strong partnerships.**

## **BACKGROUND**

Pathogens circulating in animal populations can threaten both animal and human health, and thus both the animal and human health sectors have a stake in, and responsibility for, their control. Pathogens – viruses, bacteria or parasites – have evolved and perfected their life cycles in an environment that is more and more favorable to them and ensures their continuity through time by replicating and moving from diseased host to a susceptible new host.

While the integration of control systems across animal, food and human sectors has been attempted in some countries and regions, most country control systems are generally non-integrated with limited collaborative work.

However, the recent efforts to control highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) and contributions towards pandemic preparedness have re-emphasized the need for enhanced concentration on reducing risks associated with zoonotic pathogens and diseases of animal origin through cross-sectoral collaboration, and have underscored the fact that successful and sustained results are possible when functional collaborations are established as is the case in many countries and internationally.

While FAO, OIE and WHO have long-standing experience in direct collaboration, the tripartite partners realize that managing and responding to risks related to zoonoses and some high impact diseases is complex and requires multi-sectoral and multi-institutional cooperation. This document sets a strategic direction for FAO-OIE-WHO to take together and proposes a long term basis for international collaboration aimed at coordinating global activities to address health risks at the human-animal-ecosystems interfaces.

A complementary agenda and new synergies between FAO, OIE and WHO will include normative work, public communication, pathogen detection, risk assessment and management, technical capacity building and research development.



## FAO-OIE-WHO TRIPARTITE STRATEGIC ALIGNMENT

FAO, OIE and WHO recognize that addressing health risks at the human-animal-ecosystems interfaces requires strong partnerships among players who may have different perspectives on some issues and different levels of resources. These partnerships - which could include ones among international organizations, governments, civil society and donors - must be coordinated to minimize the burden on member countries of multiple monitoring, reporting and delivery systems, and to avoid duplicated efforts and fragmented outcomes. A framework for collaboration is necessary at national and international levels, with clear roles and responsibilities.

There is also a need to strengthen animal and human health institutions, as well as partnerships, and to manage existing and novel diseases that will be of public health, agricultural, social and economic importance in the future. When appropriate, protocols and standards for managing emerging zoonotic diseases should be jointly developed. In the cases of high-impact zoonotic diseases, improvements in governance, infrastructure and capacity building will also prove valuable to secure the livelihoods of vulnerable populations.

A joint framework to address gaps and strengthen collaboration in human and animal health laboratory activities should be developed. The framework should cover the upgrading of facilities, training and collaboration between regional and international reference laboratories for diagnosis and quality assurance. The framework should also promote cooperation between human and animal surveillance systems in analysing available evidence and evaluating responses and the timely sharing of comparable epidemiological and pathogen data across the relevant sectors.

The three organizations will work to achieve alignment and coherence of related global standard setting activities (Codex Alimentarius, OIE and IPPC) referred to in the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures. This approach does not signify integrating these institutions or building new institutions; rather, the three agencies should continue to improve communication and coordination based on their respective existing structures and mechanisms, including consideration for the publication of common standards.

The existing Codex Alimentarius (FAO/WHO) framework for risk analysis can form the foundation for sound, scientifically-based risk assessment, management and communication. Similarly, the OIE has adopted and published global standards for terrestrial and aquatic animals recognized by the WTO. This alliance could lead to the preparation of tripartite protocols for risk assessment, management and communication, including recommendations and guidance for countries on identifying data gaps.

Effective strategies for improving national, regional and community level pandemic preparedness and response should be further developed or refined. This tripartite relationship envisages complementary work to develop normative standards and field programs to achieve One Health goals.



## CURRENT FAO-OIE-WHO COLLABORATION

The three organizations recognize a joint responsibility for addressing zoonotic and other high impact diseases and have been working together for several decades to minimize the health, social and economic impact from diseases arising at the human-animal interface by preventing, detecting, controlling, eliminating or managing disease risks to humans originating directly or indirectly from domestic or wild animals. FAO, OIE and WHO have created governance structures, established early warning systems and developed mechanisms to enhance coordination and support member countries.

The three organizations provide a neutral platform for nations to engage in dialogue and negotiations. WHO and FAO have 194 members and decentralized systems that represent their organizations in regional matters and in many cases have an accredited representative before the government. The OIE, with 175 member countries, has regional and sub-regional representation worldwide. The country delegates to the OIE, usually the national Chief Veterinary Officers, are government representatives nominated by ministers.

The three agencies collaborate to advance their own normative and standard scope-setting. For instance, WHO and FAO participate in OIE's *ad hoc* thematic and working group meetings (e.g. OIE Working Group on Animal Production Food Safety). WHO contributes to FAO's work on reducing biological safety risks, and OIE contributes to the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) and its subsidiary bodies' work (Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme) for food, animal and health aspects prior to processing and marketing guidance to norms that assist in food safety and food-borne pathogens.

The FAO-OIE-WHO Global Early Warning and Response System for Major Animal Diseases, including zoonoses, (GLEWS), combines the alert and response mechanisms of the three organizations in order to avoid duplication and coordinate verification processes. FAO also has numerous databases for which integration into GLEWS is required. To support the notification of cases of the main animal diseases, including zoonoses, and the subsequent analyses of these data, the OIE has developed the World Animal Health Information System and Database (WAHIS and WAHID). The official notifications are in the public domain and contribute to GLEWS.

Similarly, WHO and FAO produce INFOSAN, which alerts national focal points on the occurrence of regional or global concerns for a food safety event. The three organizations also participate in the Working Group on Animal Production Food Safety, established by OIE, to develop guidelines to enhance the responsibilities and effectiveness of Veterinary Services in improving food safety at both the international and national levels. FAO and OIE have developed a joint Network of Expertise on Animal Influenza (OFFLU) to support international efforts to monitor and control infections of avian influenza. Links between OFFLU and WHO's Global Influenza Programme are now strong, facilitating a free exchange of information and the establishment of joint technical projects between the two networks.

The organizations recognize the importance of and assist member countries to improve their national legislation by enabling veterinary and public health authorities to carry out key functions, including animal production, food safety, inspection and certification of animal products, importation or internal quality control of pharmaceuticals, as well as compliance with international obligations. Evaluation and gap analysis tools (such as the OIE Pathway for Veterinary Services) are used at the global level and must be further developed.

FAO, OIE and WHO have together developed numerous coordination mechanisms. Annual tripartite meetings are organized alternatively by the three organizations in order to improve coordination. The tripartite organizations also communicate weekly regarding matters of common interest and have liaison officers that function at the global level, which has facilitated the preparation of joint messages and shared publications. Technical experts from the three organizations regularly participate in technical meetings or consultations hosted by partner organizations and, at times, represent the other organizations at high level conferences.

The two principal agencies dealing with animal health issues, the OIE and FAO, launched in 2004 the Global Framework for the Control of Transboundary Animal Diseases (GF-TADs), which provides a clear vision and framework to address endemic and emerging infectious diseases, including zoonoses. WHO is associated with this mechanism through GLEWS, in the case of zoonoses, where information exchange occurs daily.

The three international organizations have an important role in information generation and dissemination, networking and capacity building at various levels. Expert consultations, technical meetings and the elaboration of various documents ranging from guidelines and practical manuals to strategic and policy papers are readily made available to countries. For example, in 2004, a consortium of agencies, including FAO, OIE and WHO, developed the *International Portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health (IPFSAPH)*, an online source to facilitate international trade in food and agricultural products.

At the regional level, FAO and OIE have established the Regional Animal Health Centres (RAHCs) that provide member countries with technical support and evaluate national and regional projects, supported where necessary by FAO and OIE networks of expertise to further advance international standards, provide guidance and promote capacity building. The Animal Health Regional Centres operate directly within the framework of the GF-TADs Agreement. Finally, FAO, OIE and WHO recognize Farmer Field Schools and livestock owners' training as an important tool in the development agenda, which if successful, can fully address problems surrounding zoonosis prevention and hygiene, best agricultural practices, and care and use of natural resources through concepts such as participatory approaches to learning.

## **JOINT ACTION FOR FUTURE COLLABORATION**

Joint efforts should be engaged at regional and national levels to obtain deeper and sustainable political support for integrated prevention of diseases and the effect of high impact pathogens of medical and veterinary importance. There is a need for the joint development of effective interventions to ensure coherence of action and awareness among the general public and policy makers of risks and appropriate actions needed to minimize human infection by pathogens of animal origin.

Models for forecasting animal disease outbreaks should be developed in close collaboration with all relevant sectors and institutions so that animal disease outbreaks which precede human outbreaks can provide an early warning, and ensure preparedness and a targeted response. There is also a need to advocate for increased funding support and explore research partnerships with the private sector. The three agencies should align data collection, risk assessment and risk reduction measures, and focus on the development of outbreak investigation and response strategies which merge animal and human health dynamics into a comprehensive approach for disease detection and control. The development of capacity for joint risk assessment on priority zoonotic and other high impact diseases should be incorporated into coordinated regional action plans.

In order to achieve more effective management of zoonotic and other high impact diseases in the future, there is a global need to improve diagnostics, data analysis and risk assessment, epidemiology, social science and communication.

Linking expert institutions through global networks within both the animal and health sectors would enable new real-time systems where methodology, data availability and responsibilities are shared both horizontally and vertically. Improved networking among countries promotes trust, transparency and cooperation.

## **THE WAY FORWARD**

FAO, OIE and WHO are committed to working more closely together to align activities related to the animal-human-ecosystems interfaces in order to support member countries. The emergence of new or the re-emergence of existing animal diseases, including zoonoses, the growing threat of transboundary animal diseases, the impact of environmental changes and globalization, as well as new societal demands related to food security, food safety, public health and animal welfare, emphasize the critical need for collaboration between the three organizations.

Prevention of the emergence and cross-border spread of human and animal infectious diseases is a global public good with benefits which extend to all countries, people and generations. The tripartite partners encourage international solidarity in the control of human and animal diseases, while providing international support to member countries requesting assistance with human and animal disease control and eradication operations.

The three organizations envisage a coordination mechanism to better consolidate fragmented efforts at global, regional, national and sub-national levels. The establishment of a Ministerial Conference through which different international and country stakeholders voice expectations and determine future activities under a banner of consensus is required. As the principal technical organizations, FAO, OIE and WHO should lead and promote the agenda by organizing a joint Ministerial Conference involving ministers of agriculture and health at the global level to provide a platform to discuss issues related to animal and human health, including zoonoses, and the impact on health and development.



