

OIE's response to COVID-19

In a few months, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted our communities and ways of life. With devastating effects on society in nearly all countries of the globe, it has also heavily challenged our food supply chains, livelihoods, economies as well as animal production systems. All are indeed intrinsically linked.

The unprecedented nature of this pandemic and the mysteries around this virus have required new and innovative approaches to tackle it. At a time when much uncertainty remains and much work still needs to be undertaken to understand how the virus emerged and entered the human population, one certainty abides: collaboration across sectors is key to respond to this crisis.

The OIE has been intensively working with its network of experts and liaising closely with its Members to better understand the virus and its emergence and to enhance capacity of countries to respond to this multifaceted crisis. The activities of Veterinary Services contribute to addressing critical needs, such as food provision, which are heavily challenged in the current circumstances. In these times where solidarity is more important than ever, they have also been supporting the response capacity of human health services in various ways.

A coordinated and scalable response mechanism

Through its mission to set animal health and welfare standards, to inform and to build capacity, the OIE is fully mobilised to support the work of its partners and to accompany Veterinary Services across the world to address the situation.

Within days, the OIE put in place an **Incident Management System** to coordinate its response to COVID-19 internally and with external key partners such as the World Health Organization (WHO). In January, under the leadership of the OIE Wildlife Working Group, the OIE mobilised an expert group to provide scientific advice and to develop guidelines on a range of topics linked to human-animal-ecosystems aspects of COVID-19. These include identifying research priorities, communicating results of on-going research in animals, developing scientific opinions on the implications of COVID-19 for animal health and veterinary public health, and providing practical guidance for Veterinary Services. Subsequently an expert group was established to assess the risks and implications of COVID-19 for trade in animals and animal products.

The OIE developed high-level guidance on testing human samples for COVID-19 in veterinary laboratories to support public health services in meeting the extraordinary demand in testing, which has been a critical aspect to the pandemic response in many countries.

Following widespread human infection, several species of animals have also been infected with SARS-CoV-2. As well as ensuring the international dissemination of officially approved information on such events, the OIE developed guidance on the rationale for testing animals to support public and animal health risk assessment and risk management.

While international trade has been heavily challenged, the OIE has called countries not to take sanitary

restrictions linked to COVID-19 unless there is scientific justification for doing so. Facilitating safe trade of animals and animal products, in line with OIE Standards, is indeed crucial to avoid the interruption of food chains for the most vulnerable populations.

In April, acknowledging the possible wildlife origin of COVID-19 and citing several other recent significant disease spill over events at the human-animal-ecosystems interface, the OIE Wildlife Working Group issued a statement on Wildlife Trade and Emerging Zoonotic Diseases. It highlights that several recent spill over events, including SARS and Ebola virus, have resulted in severe socio-economic crises as a consequence of the poorly regulated wildlife trade. Wildlife trade is highly complex and carries both risks and benefits. Thus, there is a need to support legal, sustainable and responsible wildlife use by providing sound guidance, standards, and risk assessment and risk management tools. The Working Group called for action to reduce risk of future spill over events whilst promoting welfare and biodiversity.

Looking to the future the OIE has initiated an ambitious work programme with its Wildlife Working Group, its Members and international partners, in order to reduce and manage risks of spill over events between wildlife, livestock and humans, whilst ensuring the protection of biodiversity. Although the origin of the virus causing COVID-19 has not been confirmed yet, it is highly suspected to have emanated from wildlife. The OIE is working on new developments to increase good practices in wildlife trade and facilitate the implementation of integrated wildlife surveillance systems, as well as to improve knowledge on wildlife viruses through research. This will aim to produce new guidelines, and if necessary international standards, which will cover transportation, capture, farming, marketing, and consumption of wildlife, and to raise awareness on best practices.

The OIE remains committed to communicate timely and verified science-based information to the international community as new knowledge comes to light.

OIE Expert Groups

	Permanent Working Group	Ad hoc Groups		
	Wildlife	COVID-19 and the human animal ecosystem interface		Safe trade in animals and animal products
		<i>Advises on investigations into the possible role of animals as a reservoir of SARS-CoV-2 and in zoonotic transmission.</i>		
		Advisory Group on animal health laboratories	Advisory Group on animal health surveillance	
Objective	<i>Informs and advises the OIE on all health problems relating to wild animals, whether in the wild or in captivity.</i>	<i>Develops high-level considerations for diagnostic testing of human specimens for SARS-CoV-2 virus in veterinary laboratories, to support Public Health pandemic response.</i>	<i>Develops high-level consideration based available scientific evidence of SARS-CoV-2 infection in animals.</i>	<i>Monitors new knowledge related to SARS-CoV-2 that may affect risks to human health or animal health associated with international trade in animals or animal products.</i>
Resources available to date	Statement Wildlife Trade and Emerging Zoonotic Diseases	Guidance on Veterinary Laboratory Support to the Public Health Response for COVID-19	Considerations for sampling, testing, and reporting of SARS-CoV-2 in animals	Considerations on the application of sanitary measures for international trade related to COVID-19

In this Newsletter, you will find all the resources developed by the OIE.

A multisectoral approach

The COVID-19 pandemic has awoken the need for longstanding and sustainable One Health collaboration. From the start of the crisis, existing Tripartite frameworks for emergency management have been used. OIE experts have participated in the WHO's International Health Regulations (2005) Emergency Committee regarding the outbreak of coronavirus disease (COVID-19) and have supported the WHO R&D blueprint, which is a global plan that allows the rapid and coordinated activation of research and development activities.

Beyond collaborative research activities, the animal health sector has contributed in various ways towards building a common response to the pandemic in the field. The veterinary profession has shown its commitment to support the work of human health authorities. Whether for the provision of testing capacity by animal health laboratories, through donating essential materials such as personal protective equipment and ventilators, or through the direct contribution of human resources and expertise, Veterinary Services have greatly contributed to support the international and national response to COVID-19. Several articles of this Newsletter give an overview of the initiatives undertaken in some OIE Members.

Planning ahead

There is no doubt about it, COVID-19 has disrupted our present time so much that it has sent shockwaves into the future, creating greater fragments of uncertainty but also space for innovation. We are not quite sure what the future holds but we know that we can influence it through our actions in the present. The OIE must anticipate and prepare for challenges and opportunities to better adapt its operations and support its membership.

The OIE has been preparing for an event like COVID-19 for several years. Pandemic preparedness and biological threat reduction have been high on the agenda, leading to the establishment of mechanisms such as OFFLU (which would respond to an influenza pandemic of animal origin), a biological threat reduction strategy (supported by two global conferences) and several projects which are supporting capacity building for emergency management and improved sustainability of laboratories.

The OIE has a track record of responding to disease emergence at the human animal interface, having mobilised for H5N1 avian influenza ('Bird Flu'); Pandemic H1N1; MERS; and H7N9 zoonotic avian influenza.

When the OIE was restructured in January 2020 to notably include foresight and a Preparedness and Resilience Department, it was to take into account global change which is reshaping our environment, in terms of climate, human behaviours and land use, for example.

The OIE will use foresight to guide its approach – an applied set of methodologies to consider possible future outcomes or “futures”. Foresight is not a means of forecasting or predicting the future. Rather it is a means of acknowledging numerous possible futures, some of which we have a hint of given information available today, and allowing the opportunity to be better prepared to address a future made of multiple eventualities. Our collective will and coordinated action remain essential to ensure the OIE and our Members' Veterinary Services contribute to a better and safer future.

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