Controlling and eradicating animal diseases is crucial to economic, human and environmental health, and is the primary aim of the OIE. Director General Dr Bernard Vallat reveals more about the Organisation’s work to improve animal health and welfare globally.
Could you summarise the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE)’s primary aims? For what reason was the Organisation founded?

The OIE was established through an international agreement signed by 28 countries on 25 January 1924, more than 20 years before the UN was formed. In May 2003, the Office became the World Organisation for Animal Health while keeping its historical acronym OIE. In May this year, the OIE will count 180 Member Countries.

Since its creation, the OIE has played a key role as the sole international reference organisation for animal health, enjoying established international recognition and benefiting from direct collaboration with the Veterinary Services of all its Member Countries, support from their governments and relevant stakeholders.

What actions are you taking in respect to safeguarding world trade to ensure global sanitation?

The OIE is an international intergovernmental organisation currently composed of 178 Member Countries. It is mandated to improve animal health and welfare worldwide, regardless of the cultural practices or economic situations in member countries. It elaborates health standards and recommendations for disease prevention and control methods and for the safety of international trade in animals and animal products. These standards are science-based and adopted democratically by the Member Countries. They are recognised by the World Trade Organization (WTO) as reference standards and are published in the OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code, Aquatic Animal Health Code, Manual of Diagnostic Tests and Vaccines for Terrestrial Animals and the Manual of Diagnostic Tests for Aquatic Animals.

Further missions include: seeking to ensure transparency in the global animal disease situation; collecting, analysing and disseminating the latest veterinary scientific information on animal disease control; encouraging international solidarity in the control of animal diseases by providing technical support to Member Countries requesting assistance with animal disease control and eradication operations; improving the legal framework and resources of national veterinary services; developing standards that ensure animal and food safety by eliminating hazards existing at the production phase of all products of animal origin; and raising awareness of the close relationship which exists between animal health and welfare.

Would you outline the OIE’s structure and strategic plan?

The OIE is placed under the authority and control of the World Assembly of Delegates, designated by the governments of all Member Countries. The day-to-day operation of the OIE is managed at its headquarters in Paris and placed under the responsibility of the Director General who is elected by the World Assembly of Delegates. The headquarters implements the resolutions, which have been passed by the World Assembly and developed with the support of specialist commissions elected by the Delegates.

The OIE maintains five Regional Representations in the following areas: Africa, the Americas, Asia and the Pacific, Europe and the Middle East. Their goal is to provide regionally adapted services to OIE members so that they may strengthen the surveillance and control of specific animal diseases locally. It also maintains six Sub-Regional Representations.

Which areas of the world most require your assistance and how does the OIE support them?

The OIE provides technical support to Member Countries requesting assistance for animal disease control and eradication operations, including diseases transmissible to humans. Notably, the OIE offers expertise to the poorest countries to help them control animal diseases that cause livestock losses, present a risk to public health and threaten other Member Countries. The OIE has permanent contact with international, national, regional and political and financial organisations in order to convince them to invest more and better on the control of animal diseases and zoonoses in priority regions. This should provide a more balanced north-south distribution of advanced expertise, allowing more countries to access high-quality diagnostic testing and technical knowledge within their own region, thus facilitating early disease detection and rapid control. A high level of scientific expertise is also essential to allow countries to formulate science-based animal health control strategies and to maintain veterinary scientific communities that support the standard setting process of the OIE. Twinning projects provide mutual benefits by creating joint research opportunities.

What is meant by the One Health approach, why has it been developed?

Animal diseases that are transmissible to humans, such as avian influenza or rabies, present a global public health risk and it is imperative to prevent or combat them at every level. The most effective economical solution to protect humans is to combat all zoonotic pathogens by controlling them at their animal source.

The One Health concept is a collaborative and all-encompassing approach. It is founded on the awareness of the major opportunities that exist to protect public health through policies aimed at preventing and controlling pathogens within animal populations, at the interface between humans, animals and the environment. This collaboration between relevant players (medical doctors, veterinarians, wildlife managers, etc.) must be translated as a new and fundamental paradigm at the national level.

How is the OIE supporting this initiative?

Recent efforts in controlling emerging pandemic diseases of animal origin and contributions towards pandemic preparedness have re-emphasised the need for enhanced collaboration on reducing risks of zoonotic potential at its source. Therefore, the OIE continues to insist on the critical need for constant improvement of veterinary governance and its cooperation with...
public health managers and for all relevant activities to be considered as a global public good benefiting all people and generations.

The OIE provides the advice needed by its members to support them in preventing and managing serious animal disease outbreaks, including zoonoses. For the last few years, it has consistently advocated that improving the governance of animal health systems, in both the public and private sector, is the most effective way to safeguard global animal and human health when zoonoses occur.

The OIE strongly supports activities to expand the scientific basis for effective intersectoral collaboration and identify ways to operationalise One Health in policy and practice. In support of this commitment, the OIE participates in intersectoral networking and technical activities, and sponsors and contributes to intersectoral conferences, workshops and consultations that are usually co-organised by human and animal health partner agencies.

Putting the One Health vision into practice has been facilitated by a formal alliance on this topic between the World Health Organization (WHO), the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the OIE. The three organisations have published a joint concept note clarifying their reciprocal responsibilities and objectives in this field. They have also chosen the following as priority topics for their joint actions: rabies, zoonotic influenza viruses and antimicrobial resistance.

What research are you conducting under the ‘food safety and animal welfare’ objective?

The OIE Member Countries have decided to provide a better guarantee of the safety of food from animal origin by creating greater synergy between the activities of the OIE and those of the Codex Alimentarius Commission. The OIE’s standard-setting activities in this field focus on eliminating potential hazards existing prior to the slaughter of animals or the primary processing of their products (meat, milk, eggs, etc.) that could be a source of risk for consumers.

Due to the close relationship between animal health and animal welfare, the OIE has, at the request of its Members, become the international standard-setting organisation. Its international standards, recommendations and guidelines relate to both terrestrial and aquatic animals and are exclusively science based.

How important is a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to the OIE’s work?

It is crucial to the effective and efficient work of the OIE. This is the reason why the Organisation has developed a very powerful collaborative network distributed all over the world. Our network of 284 Reference Centres – 241 Reference Laboratories in 37 countries and 43 Collaborating Centres in 24 countries – constitutes the core of our scientific expertise and excellence. The OIE has signed 62 cooperation agreements with other intergovernmental organisations, international NGOs and global private sector bodies, in various areas. The OIE also works closely with WHO and FAO notably in the framework of the One Health concept.

In 2014, the OIE celebrates its 90th anniversary and has recently launched a new website dedicated to this event: www.90.oie.int

www.oie.int

A new strategy

The Organisation is currently running its fifth strategic plan, which covers the period 2011-15. It focuses on several topics:

- The contribution of animal health to food security, through the reduction of disease in food-producing animals and bees
- The application of the One Health concept for the reduction of high impact diseases at the animal-human-ecosystem interface
- The strengthening of work on aquatic animal health
- A continued commitment to strengthen good governance of Members’ Veterinary Services (legislation and its appropriate implementation) using the OIE World Animal Health and Welfare Fund and in collaboration with global partners and with global, regional or national donors
- A special emphasis is placed on the global improvement and harmonisation of veterinary legislation capacity building of national policy makers and of initial and continuous veterinary education