

WORLD HORSE WELFARE ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2021
DR MONIQUE ELOIT, DIRECTOR GENERAL OF THE OIE (VIDEO)
– THE IMPORTANCE OF EVIDENCE IN ANIMAL HEALTH AND WELFARE–

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to thank World Horse Welfare for inviting me for a keynote on how the OIE relies on expertise, evidence and data. I am sorry not to be with you in-person today but thanks to technology I am very pleased to have the opportunity to make this presentation.

Dear participants,

Our fellow citizens are increasingly worried about the future of our planet: climate change, overconsumption of resources, pollution of our environment, and of course the risk of pandemics; so many challenges and concerns in today's accelerating world. More and more people want to return to practices that are more respectful of our environment and human well-being. They expect proposals to improve our daily lives, while at the same time being dubious about scientific progress. In addition, thanks to the access to numerous platforms, some consider themselves an expert in having opinions on everything regardless of their level of education to understand the information.

But that is not new, only more prominent today due to social media.

It is for this reason that it is necessary to continue to base our positions on accurate and robust scientific analysis, but also to find the appropriate wording to communicate in order to avoid misunderstandings, approximations or, worse, misinformation.

In many of your respective countries, this concern has been addressed over the recent years by splitting the scientific evaluation devoted to specialized agencies from the risk management under the legal responsibility of the Authorities.

The OIE has of course considered this context and adjusted its practices. Today, I would like to share with you some thoughts on this matter and present to you how we deal with this issue of evidence in our daily work.

Let me firstly remind that the World Organisation for Animal health (OIE) was established in 1924 with a two-fold mandate: to collect and publish worldwide sanitary information notified by the Members in order to inform all the parties interested in trading animals and animal products about the trends of diseases; and secondly to set standards to ensure a safer trade and more broadly to improve the prevention and control of animal diseases. Thus, since its inception as intergovernmental organisation, the OIE prides itself on being a science-driven organisation.

In this respect, the recognition of our scientific impartiality was made by WTO Members in 1995 when they adopted the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (the SPS Agreement) by which the OIE was recognised as the international standard-setting organisation for animal health and zoonoses. Any dispute about animal health leading to a complaint before WTO involves the OIE, which provides scientific input to clarify the ins and outs of the dispute. Animal welfare related matters are not considered by this SPS Agreement yet, but why not in the future if we recall the dispute between Canada and the European Commission about the import and marketing of seal products.

Over the years, our programmes have diversified but always with the same major objective, namely improving the sustainability of animal production. Indeed, while one of the Sustainable Development Goals is 'Zero Hunger', we have to keep in mind that insufficient access to food, zoonoses and food-borne diseases still impact millions of people worldwide. With 18% of the world's population engaged in animal husbandry or in the processing and marketing of animal-based foods, these people's livelihoods and socio-economic status depend on the health of animals.

But this objective must be considered in the light of other challenges such as climate change, food consumption patterns and animal welfare along with increasing expectations for more environmentally friendly animal production. However, the OIE has neither the mandate nor the resources to implement such ambitions on the ground. This is why supporting the Veterinary Services of our 182 Member Countries is crucial. They must be supported to be more robust, sustainable and resilient to respond to so many challenges in a so rapidly changing world.

The current 7th Strategic Plan of the OIE shares a global vision and a framework for action for 2021-2025; it has been designed and structured on the achievements made in the previous Strategic Plans.

Without presenting the plan in all its details, I would like to highlight some of its components:

1. Firstly, we have to recall the principles guiding our engagement, namely scientific excellence, independence, transparency, solidarity and partnership.
2. Then, our Strategic Plan is structured in five key chapters, the first one being dedicated to Scientific expertise.

To support the implementation of this objective, the OIE progressively build a specific Science system encompassing 4 Specialist Commissions, 2 Working Groups (one on AMR and the other on Wildlife), temporary *ad hoc* Groups, as well as an amazing network of Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres.

Before any election or nomination, all applications are assessed against specific criteria and according to standard operating procedures. Then, the work undertaken by these commissions and groups of experts is conducted in complete independence, and it is my responsibility as DG to protect this scientific independence from any external pressure, whether political or economic.

To complete the own expertise of the Members of our Commissions or Groups, the OIE makes available to them data produced by several in-house sources, in particular the information collected through the OIE WAHIS (World Animal Health Information

System) which are interesting to follow the evolution of the diseases in time and in their geographical expansion; But, information on diseases is not sufficient to understand the realities on the ground, which is important to better target the issues we need to work on as a priority.

This is why we are engaged in two ambitious programmes: the OIE Observatory and GBADs (for Global Burden of Animal Diseases).

- The first programme, the OIE Observatory: While the development of standards is a central mission of the OIE, the Organisation must also look at how they are used/implemented by Members. Monitoring their implementation will enable the OIE to identify and analyse the difficulties faced by OIE Members and better support them. The OIE Observatory aims to ensure that the Standards developed are relevant and fit for purpose and to adapt capacity building activities to Members' needs.
- The second programme I would like to introduce here is GBADs, a multi partner program: the objective of GBADs is to roll out a framework on measuring animal health burdens and their impacts on human lives and economies. Gathering socio-economic data is crucial because we know that decision makers lack the information to accurately assess whether their investments target the animal health issues that have the most significant impact on human wellbeing.

Finally, at the end of the whole process and having used all the data at our disposal, the draft standards and recommendations are submitted to the consideration of the Assembly, and they are based solely on scientific knowledge. It is then up to the Members to adopt or reject these drafts, taking into account other considerations, as it has been done for the chapter on laying hens submitted at the last General Session in May 2021.

Now, specifically on animal welfare

Since 2002 the OIE, at the request of Members, became the global leader in the development of international standards in animal welfare. The first OIE international

standards on animal welfare were published in 2005, and since then, 18 animal welfare chapters have been adopted to address animal welfare of terrestrial animals and farmed fish.

The development of new and revised OIE standards follows the OIE standard-setting process as briefly described before. The outputs of this work are circulated to Members for comments.

Indeed, in addition to the scientific excellence, the second principle promoted by the OIE is transparency on its standards development process. All reports from OIE Specialist Commissions and *ad hoc* groups are published on the OIE public website. The OIE Delegates are requested to provide comments on these reports; comments from international organisations having a cooperation agreement with the OIE are welcome too, as they often represent a very useful source of information.

However, only comments providing scientific knowledge or evidence are taken into consideration and shared with the Presidents of the Commissions. The final outcome of this work belongs to the Assembly of Delegates, which is sovereign to decide the adoption -or not- of a new or revised standard.

On a subject of particular interest to you, in 2016, Chapter 7.12, dedicated to Welfare of working equids, was adopted. This chapter was developed in response to Members recognition that in many countries, working equids are used for transport and traction and contribute directly and indirectly to households' livelihoods and benefit communities as a whole. That being recognized, a standard has been set to provide recommendations on the welfare of working equids. This chapter was revised in 2018 to incorporate new science developments.

I previously referred to the network of OIE Collaborating Centres. With regards to Animal Welfare, the OIE has four Collaborating Centres located in the Americas, Europe, and Asia Pacific regions. They are mainly consortium of research centres and

universities. They provide scientific expertise and support to the OIE and its Members, mainly in farm animals, dog population management and in the use of animals in research and education.

To conclude on Animal Welfare, let me remind that the OIE Global Animal Welfare Strategy was adopted in 2017 to provide continuing direction and coordination of the organisation's actions in this important field. One of the key components is the OIE Animal Welfare Forum, which aims to bring together our Members and partners to openly discuss relevant animal welfare topics. To date the Animal Welfare Global Forum has been held in 2019, 2020 and 2021 to address implementation of animal welfare standards, animal transport and the relation between animal welfare and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, respectively.

Another important capacity building activity to support the implementation of OIE standards at the national level was the nomination of OIE Focal Points for animal welfare. The OIE organises regular training seminars for them. I take this opportunity to highlight some important collaborative work between the OIE and the International Coalition for Working Equids, in which World Horse Welfare participated in two successful special awareness days were conducted as part of two National Focal Points Seminar, one Lesotho in 2018 and one in Brazil in 2019.

To conclude

As a regulation-oriented body, the OIE has developed an evidence-based approach that is central to the independence, neutrality and relevance of its outputs. The Organisation's reputation rests on the timeliness, quality and objectivity of the scientific evidence used for its own activities. The OIE must and will continue to provide analyses, based on the best evidence available, to maintain and increase the trust of its Members and partners, as well as for its credibility.

Thank you very much for your attention and I wish you a fruitful Conference.