

CATALYZING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AN ANIMAL HEALTH FORUM FOR AFRICA

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SUMMARY

Enzootic animal diseases constitute a major constraint for the quantitative and qualitative development of livestock in Africa. Some of these diseases are transboundary and their effective control needs mutual coordination between the target countries. All the African countries have their own national veterinary services, however, many of these services are particularly new and facing teething problems. They require additional trained staff, relevant facilities and financial assistance in order to upgrade their performance to an acceptable level. Accordingly, it is recommended to establish an African forum for animal health in order to help these services to sort out their problems and subsequently assist in solving such problems. The main objectives of the proposed forum include :

- Organizing training workshops on the standard parameters for modern epizootiological investigations and on the preparation of different animal diseases emergency preparedness and contingency plans to be applied in cases of sudden occurrence of relevant animal health disasters.
- Helping in improving the national diagnostic capabilities.
- Selecting some active national laboratories to act as Reference African Veterinary Laboratories for a certain disease or for a group of diseases.
- Initiation of inter-country cooperation in disease monitoring and reporting as well as in emergency control reactions for new or re-emerging epizootics.
- Stimulate for African self-sufficiency in production of potent and safe veterinary vaccines, biologics and medicines.
- Supporting the national authorities to upgrade their animal quarantine facilities and to update their animal trade regulations.
- Promote for internationally accepted trade in healthy African animals and safe animal products based on scientifically sound disease intelligence.
- Coordinate with relevant FAO programs (e.g. EMPRES, GREP, etc.).

Political approvals of the African governments and financial support of the funding institutions are pre-requisites for the establishment of the proposed forum. Accordingly, it could be feasible for the secretariat of the Organization of African Union to initiate official steps by including this proposal in the agenda of future relevant technical and/or political meetings of the representatives of the African countries in order to get their initial approvals. Thereafter, it will be possible to contact the funding institutions in order to justify the importance of the proposed forum for the development of the African countries.

Keywords: Africa, animal diseases, control, animal health forum

INTRODUCTION

Africa has special conditions for applying control of the prevalent animal diseases. Ecologically, it is very diverse and has the greatest concentration of mammalian fauna. The systems of animal husbandry are variable, but mainly dependent on pastoralism which is affected by the recurrent occurrence of draughts or floods. The seasonal movement of animals, which may be transboundary, as well as the uncontrolled animal trade can play an important role for the spread of diseases. In addition, the effective control of animal diseases is affected by the changing socioeconomic and political situations of many African countries. Although all the African countries have their own Veterinary Services, many of such services are lacking the trained staff, the relevant facilities and the required financial support to apply well organized animal disease control programs. Therefore, the enzootic diseases prevalent in these countries will be not only a constraint for their animal production development, but also such uncontrolled diseases will constitute a serious risk to the neighboring countries. Also, it should be considered that many of the prevalent animal diseases are transboundary and their effective control needs good regional coordination with the involved neighboring countries.

For example, when coordination was organized between the affected African countries to control a specific serious transboundary animal disease like rinderpest, significant good results were obtained. Accordingly, it became now possible to expect the complete eradication of this disease from the whole continent within the next few years before its foreseen global eradication in 2010.

Getting use of the success of the African experience concerning the control and expected eradication of rinderpest which was based on relevant coordination between the involved countries together with technical and financial support from different international, European and national agencies, it is proposed to establish an Animal Health Forum for Africa. It is hoped that such forum will help the starting Veterinary Services in many African countries to build up or upgrade their administrative structure, to train their technical staff, to identify their actual requirements, to sort out control priorities for the prevalent animal health problems and to initiate relevant program(s) of action.

Why animal health forum for Africa ?

In order to justify the feasibility of establishing an Animal Health Forum for Africa, the importance of improving the following conditions may explain why it is necessary to establish an institutional agency which will be responsible for initiating coordination between the Veterinary Services of the different African countries:

- (1) Animal production, in particular the livestock sector, plays an important role in food security and national economy of all the African countries. Enzootic diseases are the main constraint for developing such production. In addition, the prevalence of these diseases is a health barrier against the export potentials of African animals and animal products making them untradable commodity. Of course, such consequences will significantly affect the household supply of animal proteins as well as the national income.
- (2) Many of the prevalent diseases are transboundary (e.g. foot-and-mouth disease, rinderpest, peste des petits ruminants, Rift Valley fever, brucellosis, blood parasites, etc.) and their effective control needs well organized mutual coordination between the Veterinary Services of the involved countries.
- (3) The nature, epizootiology (including the possible role of wild animals) and effective control measures of some African animal and zoonotic diseases (e.g. bovine ephemeral fever, Rift Valley fever, Ebola, etc.) are not completely clarified. Further studies are essentially required in order to increase our understanding on such important topics.
- (4) National Veterinary Services of some African countries lack trained personnel and essential facilities required for surveillance, differential diagnosis and effective control of the prevalent animal diseases. Accordingly, it will be very important to help them to upgrade their performance to an effectively applicable level.
- (5) General weakness of Animal Health Services throughout Africa include:
 - Lack of coordination between the countries.
 - Lack of relevant mutual regional emergency preparedness.
 - Difficulty in enforcing animal quarantine measures.
 - Difficulty in controlling animal movement.
 - Absence of collective actions during the occurrence of transboundary animal disease outbreaks.
 - Contingency planning for animal disease emergency is virtually non-existent.
 - Some of the national Veterinary Services are not cooperating with the recognized World Reference laboratories in order to help them in getting reference diagnostic reagents, confirming their diagnosis, conducting advanced comparative molecular epidemiological and antigenic studies on the locally isolated pathogens, etc.

Main objectives of the animal health forum for Africa

The above listing of some negative examples for the performance of the Veterinary Services of some African countries may reflect the expected functions of the proposed Animal Health Forum which should be directed to strengthen the Veterinary Services of individual countries on one hand and to initiate inter-country relevant cooperation and mutual programs on the other hand.

Accordingly, the main objectives of the proposed Animal Health Forum for Africa may include:

1- Technical Training:

- Stimulate for increasing the numbers of veterinarians in countries lacking enough staff. This could be achieved by offering fellowships to allow national candidates to study veterinary medicine in African or European universities.
- Organizing training courses or workshops on selected topics to carry out disease surveillance, epizootiological investigation and essential parameters for disease control.

2- Upgrading the Diagnostic and Research Laboratory Facilities:

- Helping in improving the capabilities of the national veterinary diagnostic laboratories.
- Stimulating the countries which have advanced Veterinary Services to select some active national veterinary laboratories to act as National Reference Veterinary Laboratories for a certain disease or a group of diseases. Such Laboratories can directly exchange experience and materials with the relevant recognized World Reference Laboratories and may act as possible future African Reference Veterinary Laboratories.

In order to be qualified as an African Reference Veterinary Laboratory, the candidate laboratories should have the following requirements:

- i) Easy access by air transportation and telecommunication systems.
- ii) Availability of national experts (not foreign experts) of high technical standards on a continuous basis.
- iii) Assurance of providing efficient and reliable technical services to all the countries of the continent regardless of political differences among the countries concerned.
- iv) Availability of laboratory security systems to prevent exotic diseases escaping from the Reference Laboratory.

The main expected functions of these African Reference Laboratories are :

- i) To test samples received from the different African countries.
- ii) To maintain the highest international standards in diagnostic technology through well planned research activities and collaboration with the relevant international organizations.
- iii) To produce sufficient amounts of diagnostic reagents which could be used by national laboratories of the different African countries.
- iv) To provide technical advice/services as required.
- v) To develop a network of laboratories which can perform diagnostic and serosurveillance/seromonitoring services based on international standards as well as to collect type sera and strains to initiate a well organized "African Biological Bank".
- vi) To carry out relevant long-term research programs to increase our understanding on the epizootiological aspects of some still unclear points of some African animal diseases in order to improve their control.
- vii) To provide specific relevant training services.
- viii) To notify the diagnosed diseases to the involved neighboring countries as well as to the concerned international organizations.
- ix) To prepare relevant progress reports and possibly to edit the publication of related African Veterinary Research Journals.

3- Inter-country Coordination:

- Following the guidelines described in the relevant FAO Manuals, it will be essential to prepare national and regional animal disease emergency preparedness plans in order to initiate active and sustainable inter-country programs in disease monitoring and reporting as well as to identify the emergency control reactions for new and re-emerging epizootics.
- Stimulate for African self-sufficiency in production of safe and potent veterinary vaccines, biologics and medicines required for applying relevant protective and therapeutic programs. The quality assurance of the produced vaccines could be tested in the relevant PANVAC-FAO Reference Laboratory located in Ethiopia.

4- Promoting Safe Animal Trade:

- Supporting the national authorities to upgrade their animal quarantine facilities and to update their animal trade regulations.

- Promote for internationally accepted trade in healthy African animals and safe animal products based on scientifically sound disease intelligence.

How to launch the proposed forum ?

The present technical justification for the importance of starting organized and sustainable coordination between the African countries to improve the currently applied animal health programs is not new and was previously recommended in several professional, economic and political meetings. Limited long-term African animal health programs were previously implemented with success. The best examples are the successive campaigns to control rinderpest which started in the sixties by Joint Program 15 (JP15) and followed by the Pan African Rinderpest Campaign (PARC) since more than 10 years. At present, the PARC component of the Global Rinderpest Eradication Program (GREP) is ongoing.

The initiation of the above coordinating programs was predisposed by the following factors:

- (1) The occurrence of a serious transboundary animal disease in several countries.
- (2) The prevalent disease was having disastrous effect on both food security and national economy.
- (3) Realizing that the effective control of this disease should be on regional and not national bases.
- (4) The availability of a justifiable effective control program prepared by highly qualified experts.
- (5) The allocation of the required financial support by the concerned governments as well as by different bilateral, regional and international funding agencies.
- (6) Managing and implementing the main task with International Organizations (FAO, OIE, IAEA) in collaboration with the Organization of the African Union, the European Union and the concerned governments.

Nowadays, the strategy for the effective control of animal diseases is upgraded. Instead of waiting to initiate the whole control program after the occurrence of the diseases, it became dependent on the availability of advanced systems of early warning, surveillance, electronic exchange of relevant information, good preparation of animal disease emergency preparedness plans, getting use of the outcome of molecular epidemiological investigation, developing new vaccines, etc. In other words, many basic preparedness steps for the appropriate and economic control of animal diseases are now usually starting before the occurrence of these diseases. Furthermore, the preparedness for the control of the transboundary animal diseases should not be limited to the political borders of a certain country, it should be based on regional or even continental bases. For examples, without establishing the European Commission for the Control of foot-and-mouth disease in the fifties, it would be impossible to declare Europe free from this serious disease in 1993. Similarly, new FAO/OIE/IFAD programs were initiated. Examples for such programs are: the animal health component of the "Emergency Preventive System for Transboundary Plant and Animal Diseases, designated as EMPRES", the "Regional Animal Disease and Surveillance Control Network, designated as RADISCON" and the "Global Rinderpest Eradication Program, designated as GREP".

Therefore, it will be very important to call the attention of the African Animal Health Authorities on the benefits of integrating their policy with this advanced strategy and to subsequently initiate active regional coordination (which is a basic component of this strategy) with their neighboring countries. This will be in parallel to the philosophy of the proposed forum.

The concerned African and International Organizations (e.g. the Organization of African Union, FAO, OIE) usually invite the African Chiefs of Veterinary Services to participate in regular formal meetings. If the proposed Animal Health Forum for Africa will be included in the Agenda of such meetings and approved by the participants, this will be the first green light to initiate the launching of the forum. Subsequently, it will be possible for a well experienced International Organization like FAO to prepare the relevant necessary project documents actually required to launch the forum. Such advanced documents will include detailed data on the different requirements of the forum including the annual funds. At this advanced stage, political decisions will be necessary to stimulate the funding institution to support the launching of the forum.