

A person wearing a white protective suit and hood is holding a pig. The background shows a farm setting with other pigs in pens.

New international expert panel to address the emergence and spread of zoonotic diseases

Joint Press Release

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Geneva/Paris/Rome, 20 May 2021 – International organisations have come together to launch a new One Health High-Level Expert Panel to improve understanding of how diseases with the potential to trigger pandemics, emerge and spread.

The panel will advise four international organisations – the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO); the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE); the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP); and the World Health Organization (WHO) – on the development

of a long-term global plan of action to avert outbreaks of diseases like H5N1 avian influenza; MERS; Ebola; Zika, and, possibly, COVID-19. Three quarters of all emerging infectious diseases originate in animals.

It will operate under the One Health Approach, which recognizes the links between the health of people, animals, and the environment and highlights the need for specialists in multiple sectors to address any health threats and prevent disruption to agri-food systems.

Key first steps will include systematic analyses of scientific knowledge about the factors that lead to transmission of a disease from animal to human and vice versa; development of risk assessment and surveillance frameworks; identification of capacity gaps as well as agreement on good practices to prevent and prepare for zoonotic outbreaks.

The panel will consider the impact of human activity on the environment and wildlife habitats. Critical areas will include food production and distribution; urbanization and infrastructure development; international travel and trade; activities that lead to biodiversity loss and climate change; and those that put increased pressure on the natural resource base – all of which can lead to the emergence of zoonotic diseases.

The panel will guide development of a dynamic new research agenda and draw up evidence-based recommendations for global, regional, national and local action.

Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, WHO Director-General said: *“Human health does not exist in a vacuum, and nor can our efforts to protect and promote it. The close links between human, animal and environmental health demand close collaboration, communication and coordination between the relevant sectors. The High-Level Expert Panel is a much-needed initiative to transform One Health from a concept to concrete policies that safeguard the health of the world’s people.”*

Dr QU Dongyu, FAO Director General, told the panel: *“This panel will contribute to advancing the One Health agenda, by helping to better understand the root causes of disease emergence and spread, and informing decision-makers to prevent long-term public health risks. I encourage it to be a shining example of silo-breaking, systems thinking and open dialogue. Expectations for collective action and the need for effective collaboration have never been higher.”*

Dr Monique Éloit, Director General of the World Organisation for Animal Health noted: *“The COVID-19 pandemic is a stark reminder that collaboration across sectors is absolutely critical for global health. The newly established One Health High-Level Expert Panel will contribute to bringing together diverse scientific expertise. United, we will better anticipate global health threats and work to control risks at the animal source. Our Organisation is proud to provide high-level expertise, along with our partners, to develop science-based ‘One Health’ strategies and programmes.”*

Inger Andersen, Executive Director of UNEP observed: *“To end the triple planetary crisis of climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution that threaten our peace and prosperity, we have to understand that human, animal and planetary health go hand in hand. We must do more to promote transformative actions that target the root causes of nature’s destruction. The One Health High-Level Expert Panel is an important step in recognizing the complex, multidisciplinary issues at the interface of human, animal, and environmental health.”*

The Ministers for Foreign Affairs of France and Germany also joined the public launch of the One Health High-Level Expert Panel:

Mr Jean-Yves Le Drian, Minister for Europe and Foreign Affairs, France commented: *“The COVID-19 pandemic, whose zoonotic origin is strongly suspected, underlines how closely human, animal and environmental health are linked. It demonstrates the importance of the ‘One Health’ approach. It is in this context that France, together with Germany, proposed the creation of such a Panel at the meeting of the Alliance for Multilateralism organized on the occasion of the Paris Peace Forum on 12 November 2020.”*

Mr Heiko Maas, Minister for Foreign Affairs, Germany, said: *“COVID-19 has painfully reminded us that the health of humans, animals and the environment around the world is closely connected: Nobody is safe until everybody is safe. This is what we have to bear in mind to prevent future pandemics. The establishment of the One Health High-Level Expert Panel thus marks an important step in the right direction. Germany and France will continue to support the panel’s work.”*

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