

One Health: Reaffirming the European Commitment!

(October 2, 2024)

1. Key Themes and Overview

The Roundtable with participation of OSGH members, high officials from the European Commission and representatives of the newly elected European Parliament focused on the interconnectivity of human, animal, and planetary health through the lens of the One Health approach. The timing coincided with the preparations for the November hearings of the New Commissioners that are due to shepherd the EU policies in the next 5 years.

Participants emphasized the need for interdisciplinary approaches and holistic governance to address global as well as European health challenges, including antimicrobial resistance (AMR), zoonotic pathogens, and climate-related health issues. Discussions underscored the importance of breaking down silos by improving cross-sector collaboration and promoting sustainability in dealing with Health including early warning systems, preparedness and prevention within the European Union (EU) and globally.

A central theme across the discussions was the need for proactive, coordinated, and structured responses to emerging health threats across all sectors, involving also education, research and while overcoming data fragmentation through better data governance, hence the proposed One Sustainable Health Institute.

The participants supported a strong European commitment to One Health, calling for practical implementation strategies across policies. This would and should have implications for how the European Commission would organise its work internally, notably by giving a horizontal high-level responsibility to a vice president to ensure coherence among the approaches in human, animal and environmental health.

2. Main Discussions

- **One Health and Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** The meetings highlighted the importance of integrating human, animal, and environmental health data to address interconnected health challenges. Zoonotic diseases originating from wildlife, exacerbated by climate change, were a major focus. Surveillance, sequencing tools, and ecological collaboration were discussed as key measures to address these threats. The need for stronger cross-sector collaboration between human, animal, and environmental health sectors was also emphasized. It was noted that the designated commissioner Olivier Varhelyi had specific responsibilities for health, the designated vice-president Teresa Ribera had been given important responsibilities to work on risk factors across sectors, which could be used also for dealing with health/environment challenges.
- **Data Governance and Surveillance:** Participants called for a more structured approach to data collection, integration, and governance. The complexity of gathering health data from diverse sectors (human, animal, environmental) requires the establishment of an EU-level One Sustainable Health Institute to coordinate these efforts. This could as a start involve data sharing and improved compatibility among methodologies. Indeed, improved data sharing, harmonization across sectors, and surveillance systems are necessary to effectively monitor emerging threats like zoonotic pathogens and climate-sensitive diseases.

- **Climate Change and Health:** Climate change's impact on public health, particularly its role in spreading viral diseases like Rift Valley fever, was discussed. The importance of crisis preparedness in health systems, including rapid alerts for heat waves and other climate-related events, was emphasized. The discussions also covered the need for better integration of environmental data into health policy and medical practice, alongside the development of long-term strategies for responding to climate impacts.

3. Next Steps and Recommendations

- **A common narrative on One Health:** A forceful common narrative is required to communicate with decision makers garnered with specific examples of the downside dangers and challenges to health if a dysfunctional policy response was continued. The upside of well coordinated and cross sectoral action should also be presented, including the value added of such action at the EU level.
- **EU-Level One (Sustainable) Health Implementation:** The European Commission was recommended to provide solid governance internally for One Health as well as concrete ideas for implementing the One Health approach in upcoming policies. It was noted with anticipation that the Commission will be presented with ideas for One Health Governance which may result in decisions at a forthcoming meeting in Romania this autumn. A recommendation was made to establish a flagship research project to coordinate existing institutions working on One Sustainable Health issues, enhancing data governance, and integrating environmental data into health strategies.
- **Educational and Academic Reform:** Breaking down academic educational silos was a recurring theme. The various professions had difficulties to speak the same language. Participants proposed integrating the One Health perspective into university curricula, particularly in medical programs, to promote a holistic view of health and the environment. Cross-disciplinary collaboration is key to ensuring future healthcare professionals are equipped to address interconnected health challenges.
- **Proactive Measures for Zoonotic Pathogens:** Surveillance of zoonotic pathogens, improved sequencing tools, and better collaboration with ecologists and veterinarians were recommended to prevent future pandemics. The role of the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) in integrating food safety with One Health concerns, particularly antibiotic resistance, was also discussed.
- **Vaccination and Health System Preparedness:** Participants stressed the need for a coordinated EU approach to vaccination, particularly for diseases exacerbated by climate change. Strengthening health systems to prepare for heat waves and other climate-related impacts was recommended, with a focus on improving crisis preparedness and early warning systems.

4. Importance of Cross-Sector Collaboration beyond Europe

The discussions underscored the need for a cross-sector approach to governance, which integrates human, animal, and environmental health domains. Collaboration among EU institutions, research institutes, UN agencies, and wildlife conservation groups was seen as essential to ensure an effective One Health response to global health challenges.

5. Sustainability and Mental Health

The meetings also highlighted the importance of sustainability and the triple planetary crisis (climate change, biodiversity loss, pollution) in shaping health outcomes. Mental health was recognized as a critical part of the One Health approach, emphasizing the need to address its interconnectedness with environmental and public health issues.

6. Key Outcomes and Priorities

- Ensure a cross sectoral governance structure inside the European Commission that can match similar approaches among member states as well as ensure a coherent support of the EU to global efforts in the same vein.
- Establish a One Sustainable Health Institute: To integrate data from human, animal, and environmental sectors for improved governance.
- Promote One Health Training & Education: While Universities should incorporate the One Health perspective into curricula, with a focus on breaking down silos between disciplines, it is essential to develop training programs to be implemented immediately among professionals as well as government actors.
- Strengthen Data Governance: The European Commission should lead efforts to harmonize and improve data sharing across sectors to support surveillance and evidence-based governance.
- Improve Climate Preparedness: Strengthen health systems' response to climate impacts, focusing on rapid alerts, early warning systems, and crisis preparedness.
- Focus on Vaccination: A coordinated EU vaccination strategy is necessary to address climate-sensitive diseases and prevent future health crises.

7. Conclusion

The October 2, 2024 Roundtable reaffirmed the European commitment to addressing European and global health challenges through a One Health approach. At the EU level at the level of the European Institutions and in particular the Commission a structured, interdisciplinary, and collaborative response with support from the top level is crucial for preventing future health threats, promoting sustainability, and ensuring resilient health systems across Europe. By fostering education reform, improving data governance, and prioritizing proactive measures, the EU can moreover lead the global effort to advance public health, protect biodiversity, and mitigate the effects of climate change.