Coordination between Veterinary Services and other relevant authorities: a key component of good public governance

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Summary
Coordination between Veterinary Services and other relevant authorities is a key component of good public governance, especially for effective action and optimal management of available resources. The importance of good coordination is reflected in the World Organisation for Animal Health ‘Tool for the Evaluation of Performance of Veterinary Services’, which includes a critical competency on coordination. Many partners from technical, administrative and legal fields are involved. The degree of formalisation of coordination tends to depend on a country’s level of organisation and development. Contingency plans against avian influenza led to breakthroughs in many countries in the mid-2000s. While interpersonal relationships remain vital, not everything should hinge on them. Organisation and management are critical to operational efficiency. The distribution of responsibilities needs to be defined clearly, avoiding duplication and areas of conflict. Lead authorities should be designated according to subject (Veterinary Services in animal health areas) and endowed with the necessary legitimacy. Lead authorities will be responsible for coordinating the drafting and updating of the relevant documents: agreements between authorities, contingency plans, standard operating procedures, etc.

Keywords

Introduction
Veterinary Services operate within a complex network of actors, the size of which varies in line with:

– the geographic and administrative characteristics of the country

– the livestock production characteristics (e.g. scale of international trade, development of aquaculture)

– the responsibilities assigned to the Veterinary Services (in addition to animal health: animal welfare, slaughter, food safety, aquaculture, environmental protection, etc.).

Any delegation of responsibilities (e.g. for identification, vaccination, inspection, tests) to private partners (including agencies, veterinary practitioners, livestock producer groups and laboratories) is outside the scope of this article. Indeed, for such delegated responsibilities, the approach is quite different, as prior reflection is required on the terms of such delegation and its management and monitoring, i.e. there is a pre-established framework.

In this article, the issues are discussed without specifying the particular type or level of body that is in charge of the matter in each country. For example, aquaculture may be the responsibility of the Veterinary Services themselves, another department within the same ministry, another ministry, or a different type of agency.

The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) definition of Veterinary Services includes all the public and private players that contribute to the system’s overall effectiveness, under the authority of the Veterinary Authority (4). Here, the author concentrates primarily on the Veterinary Authority and the public services that come under its direct authority in their relations with other relevant authorities.
Importance of coordination

A good working relationship between Veterinary Services and partner authorities is crucial for taking effective action. It is particularly important for ensuring a rapid and coordinated response during an emergency, such as an outbreak of a contagious animal disease (e.g., setting up zones around farms, recalling certain products).

Coordination is also needed in order to provide an optimum service to users on a daily basis. Administrative duplication, double checks, and rivalries between authorities are time wasting and impose unnecessary costs on the economic actors concerned (livestock producers, food manufacturers, importers, exporters, etc.).

It is also important to optimise the use of available resources, at the very least by avoiding the duplication of certain activities but also, if possible, by developing synergies (efficiency).

The OIE Tool for the Evaluation of Performance of Veterinary Services (PVS Tool) (3) was designed to evaluate the compliance of a country’s Veterinary Services with international standards on the quality of Veterinary Services as defined in the OIE Terrestrial Animal Health Code (Terrestrial Code) (4). One of the 46 critical competencies evaluated concerns the capacity of Veterinary Services to coordinate with other relevant authorities. This critical competency is based on Chapters 3.1. and 3.2. of the Terrestrial Code (4).

Box 1 presents this critical competency as described in the OIE PVS Tool.

Earlier versions of the OIE PVS Tool included a single critical competency covering both the external and internal coordination (the ‘chain of command’) capability of Veterinary Services. Since 2010, the two concepts have been separated (critical competencies I-6-A and I-6-B), making it possible to refine the diagnosis and give due attention to each component.

Main areas of coordination

Technical areas

Originally, Veterinary Services were organised in order to manage major livestock diseases (such as foot and mouth disease and rinderpest) and zoonoses (such as tuberculosis and rabies). Their areas of intervention were gradually extended to include the inspection of live animals and carcasses at slaughter, and later – in widely varying ways from one country to another – the processing, storage (and sometimes distribution) of animal products and animal feed, in keeping with an integrated approach to food safety throughout the food chain ‘from farm to fork’. In many countries, processing, storage and distribution are entrusted to either the ministry of public health or the ministry of consumer affairs, or shared between the Veterinary Services and one or other of these ministries (1, 4).

The ministry of health and the ministry of consumer affairs are, therefore, the first bodies with which the Veterinary Services are required to collaborate, in such areas as:

– animal and foodborne zoonoses
– food safety (including veterinary drug residues and environmental pollutants)

Box 1

The capacity of Veterinary Services to coordinate with other relevant authorities: a critical competency described in the OIE Tool for the Evaluation of Performance of Veterinary Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I-6-B. External coordination</th>
<th>Levels of advancement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The capability of the Veterinary Services to coordinate their resources and activities (public and private sectors) at all levels with other relevant authorities as appropriate, in order to implement all national activities relevant for OIE Codes (i.e., surveillance, disease control and eradication, food safety and early detection and rapid response programmes). Relevant authorities include other ministries and competent authorities, national agencies and decentralised institutions.</td>
<td>1. There is no external coordination</td>
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<td>2. There are informal external coordination mechanisms for some activities, but the procedures are not clear and/or external coordination occurs irregularly</td>
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<td>3. There are formal external coordination mechanisms with clearly described procedures or agreements for some activities and/or sectors</td>
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<td>4. There are formal external coordination mechanisms with clearly described procedures or agreements at the national level for most activities, and these are uniformly implemented throughout the country</td>
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<td>5. There are national external coordination mechanisms for all activities and these are periodically reviewed and updated</td>
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Moreover, the broader the areas of responsibility entrusted to the Veterinary Services, the more numerous their technical interactions with authorities responsible for the following matters:

- veterinary drugs and products
- wildlife, both captive (zoos, circuses...) and free-roaming, hunting
- fisheries, aquaculture
- environmental protection, etc.

The welfare of farm and companion animals is a special case. In view of its direct link with animal health and veterinary education (physiology, animal husbandry, etc.) this area should, by rights, be the responsibility of Veterinary Services. Moreover, the OIE is the international organisation competent to set international standards on the welfare of farm and companion animals. Despite this, some countries have entrusted responsibility for animal welfare to other bodies.

Organisational areas

Irrespective of the technical areas covered by Veterinary Services, all their primary activities are activities of the State (design and implementation of regulations; inspection, control; export certification; animal health checks at points of entry; control of contagious disease outbreaks, etc.) and this leads them to interact with other relevant authorities in the administrative and legal fields.

The development of contingency plans against contagious animal diseases threatening a country (such as foot and mouth disease, avian influenza or Rift Valley fever) typically entails Veterinary Services working with numerous public authorities and agencies.

Ministries in charge of the following matters may be involved (this list is neither mandatory nor exhaustive):

- economy and finance (budget and operating resources, producer compensation for State-ordered slaughter, various taxes on services, etc.)
- customs and immigration (import controls on live animals, food of animal origin and veterinary products, etc.); authorities in charge of ports and airports, civil aviation, coastguard
- foreign affairs, international relations (trade negotiations, participation in regional and international bodies, relations with regional and international donors, etc.)
- justice (drafting legislation, prosecution of offenders, etc.)

- interior, police, gendarmerie (contingency plans, roadside checks, difficult checks, etc.)
- municipalities, local authorities (municipal slaughterhouses, health inspection of sales outlets, etc.)
- religious affairs
- agriculture, livestock, agricultural development
- roads, infrastructure, town and country planning (contingency plans)
- national defence, the armed forces (contingency plans, management of extreme situations)
- education (veterinary education establishments, continuing training, school education campaigns, school meals, etc.)
- research.

Three examples

- A 'rabies and stray dog control committee' will mobilise a number of ministries around the Veterinary Services, including those in charge of internal affairs, public health, municipalities, wildlife, education and religious affairs.

- In a developing country, when ministry of health officials make their regular visits to villages to promote hygiene they may also be entrusted with delivering animal health messages, particularly to women raising poultry and a few other livestock animals.

- Joint teams (Veterinary Services, Livestock Services, Health Services, Environment Services, etc.) may visit farms to avoid successive separate visits, before issuing an operating licence or conducting an investigation of an avian influenza outbreak, for instance.

Findings

To supplement her own experience, the author was given access, subject to a confidentiality agreement, to a large sample of the PVS evaluation reports available by 31st August 2011. Most of these reports related to developing countries and countries in transition.

Some of the shortcomings, varying from country to country, were as follows:

- near total lack of coordination between authorities, with highly detrimental consequences
- major rivalries, cultural misunderstandings (especially with the ministry of health)
– non-compliance with veterinary regulations by another ministry (e.g. meat is customs cleared without awaiting the permit that should be issued by the Veterinary Services)
– non-formalised coordination, based on personal relationships, or officials’ sense of responsibility, which makes it extremely tenuous, even though such informal coordination sometimes works fairly well
– meetings scheduled but not held, or meetings without minutes or follow-up.

The degree of formalisation of coordination, as well as its effectiveness, tends to depend on a country’s overall level of organisation and development. Trade concerns can be effective in driving coordination – especially with regard to checks at points of entry, prior to customs clearance. Some of the consequences of poor governance are lack of transparency, corruption, a culture of secrecy, and rivalries between authorities or individuals, all of which make it difficult for authorities to coordinate with each other, sometimes with disastrous results (such as an inability to control a contagious disease that is spreading throughout the country).

In some cases, coordination runs smoothly centrally, at the level of the Veterinary Authority, but not in the field, because of a lack of clear guidelines. Conversely, field services sometimes work together better than services at central level because they have to deal with practicalities in direct contact with users.

Similarly, coordination may be organised in some areas (e.g. border controls) but not in others (e.g. wildlife).

In developed countries, institutionalised linkages are widespread. There are written procedures for planning coordination meetings, in both the top management and field services. In practice, this means that coordination runs more or less smoothly, although cultural rivalries and power struggles are often still very much in evidence.

The highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) crisis in 2003 marked a watershed for many developing countries and countries in transition. The global HPAI threat prompted most countries in the world to develop or update formalised contingency plans to deal with a possible outbreak in poultry or humans. Many developing countries and countries in transition received international support to develop contingency plans. As HPAI plans involved many authorities (including the armed forces, tourism, etc.), they helped to establish or strengthen networks of collaboration. Since then some countries have capitalised on their experience in order to prepare plans to control other disease threats, but others failed to update their HPAI plans and have gradually allowed the matter to fall into oblivion.

The Pan African Programme for the Control of Epizootics (PACE, 1999–2006) helped to organise many linkages in the 30 African countries concerned. In other countries of the world, it was bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) in 1990/2000 that mobilised different authorities formerly unaccustomed to working together on a regular basis.

One area where coordination can be tricky is wildlife. There are very close links with the health of domestic animals (foot and mouth disease, tuberculosis, swine fever, HPAI) as with public health (rabies, HPAI). Wildlife constitute a reservoir of pathogens and can also be infected by farm animals. There is often conflict between the objectives of species conservation (e.g. bats, vultures) and land management (reserves, etc.), on the one hand, and the protection of animal and public health, on the other. It is essential for Veterinary Services to involve authorities in charge of such matters as the environment, hunting and fisheries in the design of animal disease control and prevention plans, as well as contingency plans.

Some examples of good practices

Organisational sociology teaches us that the behaviour of individuals within an organisation is determined essentially by the system in which these individuals are placed and by the challenges that this system creates. It is not individual personalities that explain why some authorities will operate in secrecy and compartmentalisation, while others will develop collaboration and consultation. These collective modes of operation are a product of the history and internal culture of the authority (or even the country), as well as of the management.

The impetus provided by management, at all levels, is crucial. Managers contribute by what they ask of their staff, the example they set and the organisation they set up.

The prerequisite is to have strong legal texts defining the responsibilities of the various authorities:
– a clear division of responsibilities between all those involved
– no overlapping or ‘orphan’ (unassigned) duties.

Human and material resources must also be adequate and, above all, distributed in line with responsibilities, to avoid any sense of injustice or an implicit hierarchy between authorities.

For it to be effective and sustainable, coordination must be managed, organised, formalised and monitored.
Consultation must be part of the routine operation of the authority – and lack of consultation should be regarded as a patent malfunction.

It is also important to be aware that people are suspicious of the unknown, and that direct personal relationships remain paramount. Officials participating in coordination meetings, or who have worked together on a specific issue (e.g. during a roadside check, in a crisis unit), or who have been able to discuss their respective working practices (agribusiness inspection, drug monitoring, etc.), will work together much more effectively thereafter, even remotely by phone or email.

Below are some examples of good practice that might be worth considering at central and/or local levels, depending on the country and domain concerned:

– the composition of coordinating committees (steering committee, technical committee, joint committee, advisory body, task force, working group, etc.) is customised yet adaptable

– the bodies involved in coordination are either permanent (those responsible for day-to-day activities such as border controls, authorisation of veterinary medicinal products, zoonosis control and wildlife) or ad hoc (those dealing with the construction of a new slaughterhouse, the management of a contagious disease episode, etc.)

– a lead authority is officially designated for each domain, and endowed with the necessary authority. Preferably this should be the first-line authority that has an overview of the issue: for animal health issues, such as contingency plans, the lead authority will be the Veterinary Services

– memoranda of understanding (framework agreements, conventions, etc.) are drawn up as required (access to laboratories in other ministries, demarcation of a zone around a disease outbreak, distribution of establishments to be monitored, etc.)

– written standard operating procedures for coordinated interventions are developed, regularly updated, tested and validated by all stakeholders

– meetings are scheduled at appropriate intervals; they are prepared, with an agenda, minutes are taken of the meetings and decisions are followed up (these are simply good meeting practices)

– contingency plans are updated (at least once a year)

– all steps are taken to ensure that animal and public health issues take precedence over other concerns, including economic ones (e.g. opening or closing establishments, at the border)

– joint in-service training sessions can be held for officials from different authorities called upon to work jointly or in a support role (e.g. during import controls or to investigate cases of food poisoning)

– occasionally officials in one authority may accompany officials from another authority into the field, in order to gain a better understanding of how they work, their problems and objectives (during an inspection or on-farm monitoring, etc.)

– local initiatives are identified and capitalised on, and in some cases, brought into general application.

A key component of good public governance

This article has shown that coordination between authorities in the veterinary sphere is much more than the formalisation of good professional practice: it is a key component of good public governance.

Good governance relates, in particular, to the way in which the State acquires and exercises the authority to deliver and manage public goods and services (2). In the context of Veterinary Services, good governance includes services accessible to all, delivered effectively, without waste or duplication, and in a transparent manner, free from fraud or corruption (2).

1) Coordination between public bodies can only be organised effectively if a framework of governance already exists, including in particular:

– a clear and shared national strategy in the field of animal health and veterinary public health

– clearly defined responsibilities; services endowed with the necessary authority; an appropriate legislative framework

– fairly allocated resources

– authorities focused on customer service.

In the absence of these elements, although working on coordination will help to improve day-to-day operations, it will be more difficult and tenuous.

2) Effective coordination mobilises methods and tools characteristic of good governance:

– a clear political will and strong involvement of the management

– regular, open and transparent consultation

– a constant concern to optimise the use of resources
structured and formalised agreements
specific actions conducted jointly to sustain formal agreements.

3) Organised coordination is a **key component** of good governance of veterinary public policy because:
- it optimises the use of available resources (human and budgetary)
- it ensures consistency between the programmes conducted by public authorities
- it avoids duplication and overlap, as well as gaps or even paralysis
- it conveys a consistent picture of government action to users, including livestock producers and economic operators; it reduces the chances of omission, fraud or corruption
- it provides a versatile, responsive framework that can, if necessary, be adapted quickly to changes in the national or global context.

That efficient coordination is crucial can be seen from the outcome of poor coordination, lack of transparency or corruption: government action can be completely paralysed, especially in an emergency; stakeholders learn to use loopholes; public authorities are discredited, etc.

**Conclusion**

Coordination between Veterinary Services and other relevant authorities is a key component of good veterinary governance. It is absolutely critical to effective action, and to optimal management of available human and material resources. Such is its importance that the OIE PVS Tool includes a critical competency on coordination (3).

Lack of coordination can negate all other efforts.

Organisation and management play a crucial role (political accountability). It is particularly important to:
- define clearly the distribution of responsibilities in the areas of animal health and public health, avoiding duplication and areas of conflict
- designate clearly the lead authorities (including in times of crisis) and endow them with the necessary authority; the Veterinary Services are responsible for coordination in the areas of, notably, animal health (including contingency plans) and, where applicable, food-chain safety
- draft and update the necessary documents, including agreements between authorities, contingency plans and standard operating procedures.

**References**


