The OIE concept of twinning between laboratories

Introduction

The most effective way of detecting, diagnosing, controlling and responding to animal disease and zoonotic incursions, is to ensure good governance in Member Countries. Integral to good governance is the ability and capacity of all Member Countries to comply with the guidelines, recommendations and international standards of the OIE that are mandated by the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The OIE has therefore embarked on a unique strategic initiative to develop an assessment and evaluation system to assist countries to identify weaknesses in their system that makes it difficult for them to comply with the minimum standards, guidelines and recommendations of the OIE. The evaluation system based on the performance, strategy and vision of a country to move towards compliance (commonly referred to as the PVS-strategy) is already in operation and applied successfully in a number of developing and in-transition countries. The assessment system considers critical aspects of veterinary service delivery such as technical capability, human and financial capital, interaction with the private sector and the needs and problems associated with access to markets. The OIE has, by linking this initiative to its overall aim to establish awareness and acceptance of the delivery of veterinary services as an international public good, elicited major financial support for this project from the World Bank and other donors, including some Member Countries of the OIE. Integral to the assessment process is also the identification of the need to establish scientific and technological expertise within these countries to enable them to become self-sufficient to early detect and diagnose diseases and to be able to provide the scientific justification for certification of animals and animal products for trade.

Although the International Committee of the OIE has already in 2002 adopted a Resolution to identify the need for support by OIE Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres to enter into partnership as advanced research institutes with developing and in-transition countries, the OIE also realises that substance to this ideal can only be given by actively moving towards scientific capacity building with the ideal to eventually establish focal points of expertise and more Reference Laboratories within developing countries. To enable the realisation of this ideal, the concept of twinning between laboratories was born to eventually ensure an even geographical distribution of expertise and Reference Laboratories for easier access to expertise for the rapid detection and diagnosis of disease.

The development and setting of OIE guidelines, recommendations and standards for both terrestrial and aquatic animals, are based on scientific principles and thereby also in support of the requirements of the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement of the WTO that sanitary measures should be scientifically justifiable. The OIE standards are developed for application
by all its Member Countries which makes it imperative that all Member Countries should contribute in the setting of standards and also be able to debate these standards from a scientific point of view when necessary. It is therefore important that developing and in-transition countries need a veterinary scientific community able to be associated in the preparation of standards. To this end, the twinning concept will create the much needed opportunities to enable developing and in-transition countries to become scientifically competent to debate on equal footing on the scientific justification of standards.

**Twinning – an integral concept to capacity building for the improvement of veterinary services**

Out of the current 168 Member Countries of the OIE, almost 72% (120) are from developing countries with variable scientific capacity or access to scientific expertise within their national laboratories - with the majority of OIE Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres and expertise still situated in the remaining 47 Member Countries. All 167 Member Countries of the OIE are however obliged to comply or move towards compliance with the international guidelines, recommendations and standards prescribed in the OIE Codes and Manuals for both terrestrial and aquatic animals. It is therefore of critical importance to establish the necessary scientific expertise in these countries and eventually ensure an even geographical spread of available expertise to provide the essential scientific support to the veterinary services within these countries, thereby enabling them to more readily apply the guidelines, recommendations and standards of the OIE.

The main objective of twinning is therefore to assist laboratories in developing or in-transition countries to build their capacity and scientific expertise with the eventual aim that some of them could become OIE Reference Laboratories in their own right. To practically apply this concept, a link between an existing OIE Reference Laboratory or Collaborating Centre with another laboratory in a developing or in-transition country must be established for exchange of scientific expertise and capacity building. Taking into consideration the current geographical spread and actual localities of OIE Reference Laboratories and Collaborating Centres, the twinning concept could imply a transfer of knowledge, training and expertise from the ‘North’ to the ‘South’ or from an existing OIE Reference Laboratory or Collaborating Centre of the South to another less advanced laboratory applying for such assistance.

- **Applying the concept of twinning between laboratories**

The procedure to implement the concept should be flexible to be adaptable to different situations - from helping as a first step to publish scientific results until eventually achieving the level required to become an OIE Reference Laboratory. The guiding or parent OIE Reference Laboratory and the selected expert(s) from that laboratory will be the driving force to ensure success in any twinning agreement and will also be responsible for the implementation and the use of financial resources under the auspices and control of the OIE.

The initiation and eventual implementation of a twinning relationship between an OIE Reference Laboratory and an applicant laboratory should be done in a stepwise approach to establish capacity and expertise and eventually move to the final phase when a participatory laboratory could become an OIE Reference Laboratory in their own right.

- **To ensure the successful agreement on a twinning process between laboratories, it will be essential that:**
a) The Delegates of the Member Countries of the two involved laboratories and their respective directors, should be in agreement on such a twinning arrangement.

b) The twinning arrangement should favour a scientific need relevant to the sanitary situation of the country or region of the applicant laboratory;

c) Communication facilities between the laboratories and experts involved must be assured;

d) The objectives, time frames and desired outcomes must be realistic and attainable.

The requirements for compliance by the applicant laboratory to enter into such a twinning arrangement will be detailed by the Biological Standards Commission taking into consideration prevailing guidelines for applicants.

- The Scientific and Technical Department of the OIE Central Bureau in close cooperation with the relevant Specialist Commissions, will manage the process by:

  a) Informing all Delegates of Member Countries under signature of the Director General of the OIE on the concept and proposed steps for twinning between laboratories.

  b) Establishing a list of existing OIE Reference Laboratories or Collaborating Centres candidates for providing cooperation and a list of applicant laboratories interested in cooperation using the OIE twinning concept.

  c) Collating the proposed projects and applications for twinning for submission of the dossiers to the relevant Specialist Commissions.

  d) Initiate and facilitate negotiations between the OIE and potential financial donours to assist twinning projects.

  e) Selection of eligible projects for financial support on the base of the estimated budget indicated by the two collaborating partners and as accepted by the relevant OIE Commission.

  f) Ensuring that the project is implemented by the existing OIE Reference Laboratory or Collaborating Centre in close cooperation with the applicant.

  g) Ensuring that technical and financial control outlined in the mutual agreement between the participating laboratories, are applied.