



## POLICY BRIEF

# KEY BELGIAN ONE HEALTH LESSONS FROM THE COVID-19 CRISIS

### THIS BRIEF

This policy brief is the result of a collaborative work carried out under the initiative of the Belgian Biodiversity Platform, Sciensano and the Federal Public Service Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment (Belgium) within the framework of the Belgian One Health Network and is supported on its principle by the Chief Veterinary Officer of Belgium and the President of the FPS Health. Its contents were compiled during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis, and started from the outcomes of the Belgian One Health [\(BEOH\) COVID-19 survey](#), initiated by BEOH in 2020, but were further developed within the network, incorporating follow-up discussions and practical reflections. BEOH is aware of the fact that **some of the following messages are not completely novel**. They have been expressed earlier by BEOH or predecessor initiatives ([BEOH launch event 2019](#), [One Health/EcoHealth workshop Brussels 2016](#), [Biodiversity and Health conference Brussels 2011](#)). They are shared by a diversity of actors in Belgium and internationally (e.g. the [Network for EcoHealth and One Health \(NEOH\) – European Chapter of EcoHealth International](#)). BEOH considers these messages are still relevant and important, perhaps even more than ever. Quite some challenges are still unanswered, and quite some challenges are on-going and demand time, and they remain an integral part of proper OH practice (such as collaboration, integration).

### KEY POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◇ The importance of an **Integrated One Health Approach**
- ◇ The importance of **inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration**
- ◇ The importance of **operationalisation**

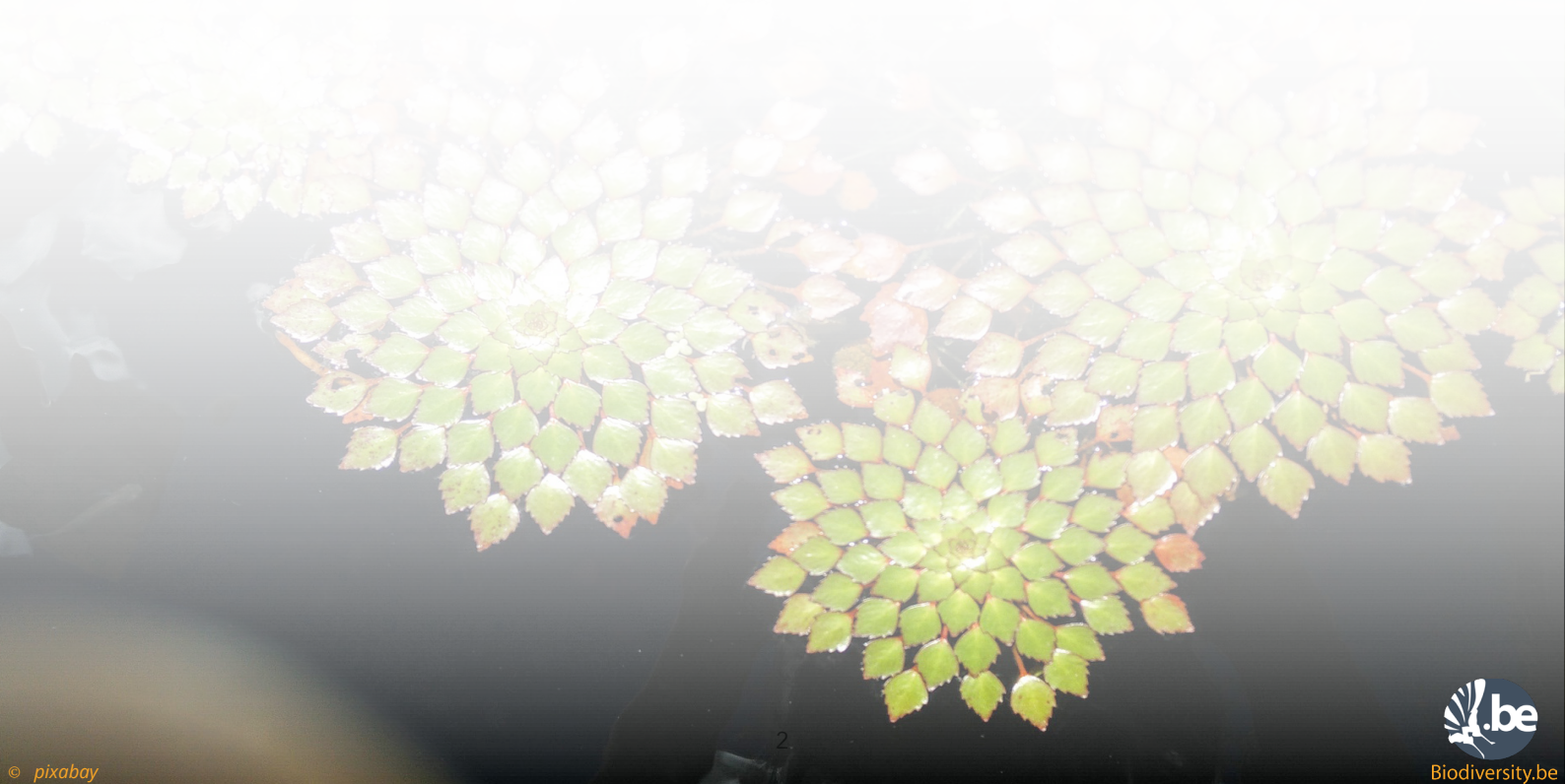
# KEY LESSONS

## The importance of an integrated One Health perspective

BEOH reiterates the importance of an **integrated One Health (OH) perspective** on both **nature related human health risks**, such as the origin of COVID-19, and **nature related human health and welfare benefits**, such as the appreciation of nature during lockdown as green space for outdoor health promotion, and animal health and welfare. In addition, in the true spirit of OH, BEOH reiterates the importance of societal responsibility, **overcoming a purely anthropocentric or biocentric comprehension or operationalization of OH**. Also, in addition, BEOH stresses the importance of **incorporating structural human drivers of OH dynamics** in such approach, e.g. in the food and economic system, the gender balance, social inequalities and the effects of COVID-19 on daily life & work. Further, also the inclusion of an **ethics perspective** is considered crucial: promoting scientific plurality and administrative neutrality, encouraging public participation in a multifaceted view on consequences of confinement measures, challenging fake news by showcasing a diversity of expert opinions.

## BEOH Support

BEOH is working on the development of a **OH perspective on the EU Green Deal**, in order to connect the OH knowledge and challenges to on-going governance initiatives in the EU, bringing together many aspects, challenges and sectors relevant to OH.





# KEY LESSONS

## The importance of inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration

BEOH reiterates the **importance of inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration**. The OH approach requires a tuning of sectors (human, animal, environment and other): better collaboration between e.g. general practitioners, healthcare workers, veterinarians, microbiologists, epidemiologists, agriculture, environment, public health, education, risk assessors, risk managers, ... Whether this is best organized by new adequate collaborative structures or by ad hoc merging of teams (in science, policy, practice) for more efficiency, is open for context specific discussion and up to the relevant actors and institutions. Anyhow, this requires sufficient and ambitious resources and political choices, in order to facilitate necessary holistic collaboration and integration. This will be compensated with avoided health care costs.

### BEOH Support

BEOH underlines the **importance of increased mutual understanding, trust building and overcoming silos** as a precondition: there is lack of sufficient knowledge of the expertise, experience and practice of the other. BEOH will contribute in this respect.

BEOH recognizes that regarding OH issues, the **connection between science and practice needs improvement**. BEOH will contribute to clearer pathways for the scientific community to feed and contribute to the short- and long-term operational response.

BEOH supports the approach that future preparedness can be improved by conceiving and implementing **practical protocols for inter-sector collaboration, with practical guidelines for handling epidemics**, “ready to use” general guidance or regulation framework, a common transversal approach, better organization of medical care and better concerted governance. BEOH supports the opportunities to build on existing legislation or regulation, on the global (e.g. the Convention on Biological Diversity), EU and regional level.

BEOH will contribute to the challenge of **reaching out to the general public and specific targets groups both in Belgium and internationally**. Specific target groups can be groups with specific cultural or socio-economic background, who are not easily reached with general communications. Among the BEOH network, intermediary groups and collaborations for specific groups, such as homeless people, immigrants, groups with vulnerable health, youth, groups in the Global South, can collaborate in this respect. BEOH sees opportunities in the current COVID-19 pandemic for raising further awareness about OH and related system challenges, the importance of health care prevention measures and related life style changes.

# KEY LESSONS

## The Importance of Operationalization

### BEOH support

BEOH reiterates that systemic challenges, like COVID-19, need an operationalized systemic approach, such as One Health. This requires an integrated perspective, overcoming barriers between disciplines, sectors, and topical foci. BEOH is developing a OH framework for this purpose, which can be used e.g. in scientific calls for OH research:

GENERIC ONE HEALTH CHALLENGES	SPECIFIC ONE HEALTH CHALLENGES		
	Integrate animal, human, plant, ecosystem health	Nature related health risks & benefits	Structural societal drivers
Holistic	Operationalize		
Collaborative			
Enabling			

### Operationalization of One Health

This still is considered quite a challenge, especially when taking into account the other aspects (expectations, demands) mentioned below.

### Specific One Health challenges.

- 1. Integration of animal, human, plant, ecosystem health** was considered as core aim of One Health. There are still quite some challenges in that respect.
- 2. Integrated view on nature related health risks & benefits:** traditionally One Health was mainly focussing on health risks, taking potential health benefits of nature contact far less into account.
- 3. Integration of structural societal One Health drivers,** or structural One Health, referring to socio-economic, cultural aspects, like globalization, travel and trade, the food system, health care.



# KEY LESSONS

## *Generic One Health challenges (cross cutting themes in the specific One Health challenges)*

**A. Holistic character of One Health:** systemic health challenges, like COVID-19, need a systemic approach, such as One Health. Complexity is an important feature of systemic problems. Taking into account and structuring complexity and decision making, dealing with inherent uncertainties, unknowns and ambiguities, is therefore at the core. The process of how to deal with complexity, also from the scientific perspective, can also be perceived as a social and normative process in itself. Complexity can never be fully grasped and should encourage us to choose what has to be taken into account for understanding and actions. These choices have an important framing effect and are normative in nature, requiring a combined scientific and deliberative effort.

**B. Collaborative. Collaboration is key to One Health,** in several forms and with several assets. This is needed to overcome silos: scientific, policy, society; disciplines, departments, sectors. In science, interdisciplinary research concerns a coordinated effort of collaboration and integration between disciplines, whereas transdisciplinarity aims at collaboration and integration between academic and non-academic groups, such as on the one hand scientists and on the other hand stakeholder groups, policy experts, the private sector or other practitioners. Implementation of One Health can benefit from transdisciplinary and iterative processes between policy, science and practice, and will enhance practical relevance of these collaborations. This also requires a collaborative attitude (soft skills) and a sharing attitude (open data, data sharing, integrated data base management).

**C. Enabling environment.** In support of the above mentioned One Health challenges, several elements of an enabling environment are to be considered. An important and often very much appreciated element of an enabling environment is a dedicated network for professionals, practitioners, stakeholders. When the ambition of integration as mentioned above sometimes leads to creation of big One Health institutions, this runs the risk of building fences rather than creating openness to (new) collaborations. This may be overcome by focusing on open, collaborative networks, which are less (institutionally) bound and more flexible, and can be open to newcomers and new ideas and approaches. Such networks should not be limited to scientific experts, but also need to be open to policy experts, local knowledge, practitioners, grass-root organisations and all relevant stakeholders.

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