

Welcome address - Pierre Kerkhofs

BeOH event "Ecosystems in the balance: supporting future policy and research"

Dear Participants,

It is my honor to welcome you to this one health event, organized by the Belgian One Health Network. One Health focuses on the interconnectedness of the health of humans, animals, plants and the wider environment.

The idea that changes in the environment have an impact on animal and human health is of course not new. Already for a long time, safeguarding public health has been one of the main reasons for environmental regulation. Similarly, zoonotic disease and foodborne illness have been a major part of public health policy almost since the beginning of public health as a discipline.

In Belgium, public health, animal health, and environmental policies are under the competence of the Federal Public Service for Health, Food Chain Safety, and Environment. Our organization was created in 2001 during an institutional reform that took place as a consequence of a public health crisis.

We are now many years later, and one health has remained important for the way we organize public health policy. We have made this more visible by adopting the slogan "One World - One Health" as a baseline to the organization.

During this time, both the scale of climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss and their impact on human health has become more visible. I quote Dr. Hans Kluge – WHO Regional Director for Europe – when I say this triple environmental crisis threatens our very existence. Outbreaks of zoonotic disease are increasing across the world, and their impact has policymakers scrambling to find solutions.

So is one health the solution to these problems?

By now, we have public services focusing on one health. We have research institutes – like our colleagues at Sciensano – focusing on one health solutions. We have one health networks, which organize events like these. The concept of one health is spreading through national and international organizations, spearheaded by advocates who are proselytizing with religious fervor.

However, if you strip away the surface, or look beyond the slogans, it is clear that there is still a lot of work to be done.

If the One Health High level Expert Panel on One Health states that the goal of one health is to sustainably balance and optimize the health of people, animals, and ecosystems; how do we translate that goal into specific research questions and policy objectives?

Put differently, which problems that we are facing as a planet or society can or should be managed taking a one health approach? And what is the benefit or added value of a one health approach in research and policy compared to a monodisciplinary approach?

Beyond the questions of scope and effectiveness, there are also broader questions related to the role of one health research, such as "which types of data, research, evidence... are needed to develop effective one health policies.

All these questions will need answers if we want to continue advocating for one health without falling into an ideological trap.

This event tries to answer these questions in the context of a specific one health problem: The role of the environment and the health of the environment in the emergence and spread of infectious disease.

Over the course of the event, speakers working on one health research or policies will highlight and summarize research findings on the role of biodiversity loss & climate change, wildlife trade and invasive alien species in infectious disease emergence, and will share examples of policies targeting these pathways. In doing so, they do not only share their contribution to the evidence base on one health with their peers, but also contribute to sharing this evidence to a wider audience of evidence users.

Finally, speakers will discuss the role of surveillance and data availability and their benefits for one health research and policies, which further highlights the need for policies benefiting these practices.

If we want to achieve one health solutions, events like these can inspire researchers and policy makers to increase their communication and collaboration. Within our organization, we are actively involved in making some of these collaborations happen, and I am glad to have our colleagues not only here as recipients of knowledge translation or science communication, but actively contributing and presenting their one health activities.

It is that active contribution and participation that I wish upon all of you as participants in this conference, because only that way, we can make one health policies a reality.