



ONE HEALTH IMPLEMENTATION IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ADDRESS THE KEY CHALLENGES OF LIVESTOCK-DEPENDENT COMMUNITIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

One Health is a collaborative approach to achieve optimal health and well-being outcomes recognizing the interconnections between people, animals, plants and their shared environment. Although widely recognised and very advanced theoretically, the One Health approach is still sparsely implemented in the field, especially in development and humanitarian contexts in the Global South. However, it offers opportunities to address the complex challenges found at the interfaces between humans, animals and the environment – especially among livestock-dependent communities – and therefore, more resources should be put in place to assure its implementation.

This paper aims to provide evidence on the added value of One Health as a framework to achieve sustainable improvements for the well-being of humans, animals and the environment in the Global South through multisectoral and transdisciplinary collaborations between NGOs, local communities, research, international organisations, funding bodies and governments. It presents the principles that guide the VSF International network in One Health implementation, and it describes the strategic axes put in place by VSF International to address the interrelated health risks that affect livestock-dependent poor and vulnerable communities. Finally, it makes a global call for strengthening the implementation of One Health to contribute towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

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1. ONE HEALTH TO ADDRESS THE CHALLENGES FACED BY LIVESTOCK-DEPENDENT COMMUNITIES IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

ONE HEALTH AT THE INTERFACE OF HUMANS, ANIMALS AND THE ENVIRONMENT

One Health is an approach that aims to promote human, animal and environmental health through multidisciplinary and multi-sectoral collaborations.

It recognizes the intrinsic linkages between animal diseases, public health and ecosystem transformation and addresses them in a holistic and systemic way in order to achieve long-lasting results.

In our rapidly changing society, it is more and more clear that the drivers behind health problems are multiple and complex. The birth of the One Health approach, in the early 2000s, responded to the need to analyse and tackle complex health problems from different angles and to design integrated solutions. Although the approach initially appeared at the academic and research level, it quickly gained support from the international community. In 2010, the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) established the so-called Tripartite Alliance to promote policy harmonization around One Health. Following this, several governments (both in the North and in the South) started to embrace the concept in their national policies, for instance through the development of National strategies on One Health or the establishment of One Health platforms to foster coordination between different health systems at ministerial and decentralized levels.

If, at the emergence of the One Health concept the debate was focusing mainly on zoonotic diseases (i.e. diseases transmitted from animals to humans and vice versa) and antimicrobial resistance (AMR), nowadays the scope is enlarging, and other issues such as food and nutrition security or economic well-being are slowly finding a place in the One Health discussions. Indeed, One Health refers not only to the absence of diseases, but more in general to the broadest concept of well-being¹ for humans and animals, which is correlated to the health of the environment.

From this point of view, the progress towards the Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) would benefit largely from the adoption of a One Health



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approach. Many of the SDGs will not be achieved if human, animal, plant and ecosystem health remain compartmentalized and collaborations are not put in place. For this reason, a paradigm shift for a de-sectoralized and more integrated approach to health is needed, and One Health could offer the framework to do so.

LIVESTOCK-DEPENDENT COMMUNITIES IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH AND THE CHALLENGES THEY FACE

Globally, livestock supports the livelihoods and food security of 1.3 billion people, of whom 600 million are resource-poor farmers². Many of them are found in low- and middle- income countries from Africa, Asia and Latin America, which we will refer to as the Global South. Despite the huge diversity and the unique specificities of each context, some common features can be found across these countries, and more specifically in the most vulnerable rural and pastoral areas where the VSF International network works.

In Figure 1 below are represented some of these common features (outer circle), as well as some recurrent challenges for livestock-dependent communities (inner circle) that impact either two or three “health pillars”, and which have to be addressed through an adapted, multisectoral, One Health approach. These challenges call for practical actions at the field level, within a One Health

¹ The World Health Organization (WHO) considers health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (WHO Constitution: <https://www.who.int/about/who-we-are/constitution>)

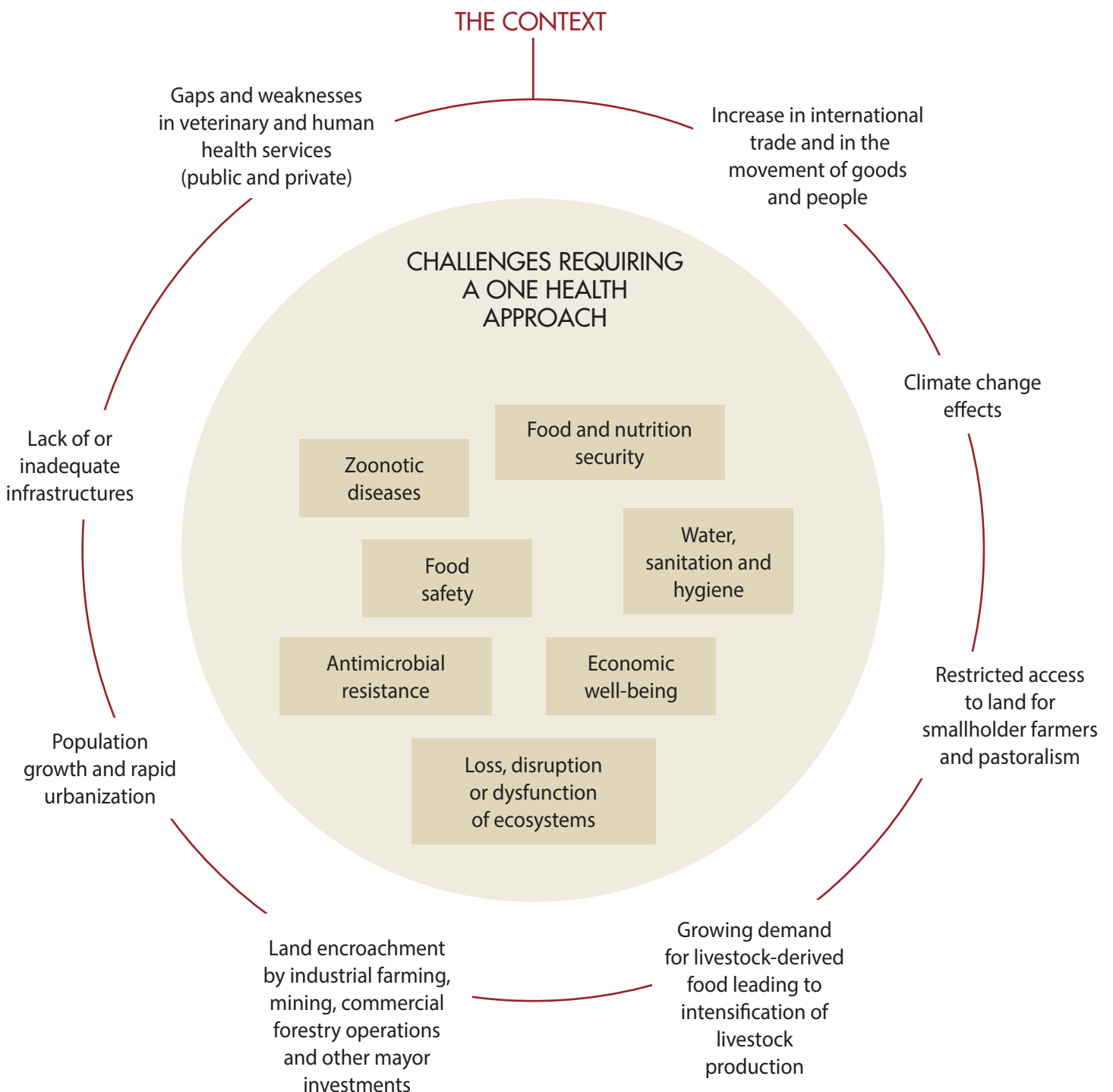
² HLPE (2016) Sustainable agricultural development for food security and nutrition: what roles for livestock? A report by the High Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition of the Committee on World Food Security, Rome.

lens, through coordination between actors from different sectors. It should be noted that the identified challenges go beyond the ‘classical’ topics of One Health such as zoonotic disease and AMR, and embrace other elements that are key for overall wellbeing of people, animals and the environment, as well for social and economic sustainability.



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Figure 1
Challenges faced by livestock-keepers communities in the Global South requiring a One Health approach ↓



2. HOW TO MAKE ONE HEALTH OPERATIONAL IN THE FIELD

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Although One Health is very advanced theoretically, its implementation at the community level is still weak. In order to address the challenges mentioned in the above, VSF International is guided by a set of principles that combine our commitment to achieve sustainable impact through development and humanitarian actions and our efforts to making One Health operational in the field. These principles accompany the day-to-day work of the VSF International network. However, it is useful to stress their importance also in the framework of One Health operationalization in the field, where they become fundamental.

1. ADOPT A SYSTEMIC APPROACH INCLUDING DIFFERENT DISCIPLINES AND SECTORS THROUGH PARTNERSHIPS

A **holistic, integrated, systemic approach** recognizes the complexity and diversity of each context and in particular the close and interdependent links between human, animal and ecosystem health. Development and humanitarian interventions should favour a **trans-disciplinary** approach and focus on **several sectors** at a time, integrating knowledge from different disciplines at every step of the project, from the inception to the evaluation. Interventions focusing on improving animal health for instance, should be designed with linkages to human health and ecosystem preservation. It is of primary importance to systematically **include the environmental pillar** in all health interventions, moving forward from the traditional collaborations between human and animal health sectors only.

One Health should be seen as a “good practice”, a guiding approach that leads to questions and contributions from different perspectives when identifying and implementing projects, and a major driver to establishing **partnerships and collaborations** that complement the core expertise of each party to tackle problems in a holistic way.

2. INCLUDE LOCAL COMMUNITIES, YOUTH AND WOMEN

Participation of **local communities and livestock keepers’ organisations** are at the core of VSF International’s development or humanitarian intervention at each stage of the project cycle. Especially in those areas where public service delivery is fragile or absent, they

have a pivotal role in the co-identification of the problems and in the design and implementation of locally-adapted solutions. Rather than being considered solely as the “beneficiaries” of One Health interventions, they should have a more central and active role. As well, their **traditional knowledge** should be recognised and mobilized in tandem with scientific knowledge and research results.

All these elements are key to assuring the sustainability and local ownership of One Health interventions and to understand the complexity of issues that affect well-being in broader terms.

3. DEVELOP PILOT PROJECTS AND INNOVATIVE SOLUTIONS

Due to the way they are conceived/identified (i.e. through participatory, holistic and multi-sector approaches), many of the projects inspired by the One Health approach will actually be “pilot-actions”, which express a certain **innovation capacity**. Innovation can be defined as the development of new and sustainable responses to needs that are new or poorly met in the current conditions of knowledge, market or public policies³. Adopting a One Health focus often allows to developing solutions that are clearly different from the solutions available locally, while being appropriate to the context.

Specific indicators and monitoring, evaluation and learning tools have to be developed to measure the interconnected achievements and impacts in terms of One Health benefits.



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³ GASL (2019) Smallholder innovations for sustainability. A policy brief from the NGO Cluster of the Global Agenda for Sustainable Livestock.

4. FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY

In conclusion, One Health should be seen as a tool to achieve sustainability, at the intersection between the environmental, economic and social pillars. The mission of VSF International is to build **resilient and sustainable livelihoods** at the interfaces of human, animal and environmental health, and to integrate livestock keepers' communities in sustainable value chains. Aiming for One Health and working according to that approach is contributing significantly to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

STRATEGIC AXES OF INTERVENTION: HOW VSF INTERNATIONAL INTEGRATES ONE HEALTH THROUGH ITS PROJECTS AND PROGRAMMES

VSF International identified some strategic axes of intervention in order to address, through a One Health lens, the complex and multidimensional challenges faced by smallholder livestock keepers and pastoralists in the Global South. Each of the following strategic axes should embrace the guiding principles outlined in the previous section.

A. QUALITY ANIMAL HEALTH SERVICES, INCLUDING COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES

Animal health is crucial to improve food and nutrition security on one side, and public health (tackling zoonotic diseases, AMR, food safety) on the other side, with wider benefits for people's well-being and the maintenance of healthy ecosystems. Efforts in making One Health operational should focus on simultaneously reinforcing the capacities of human and animal health services and their relation to the environmental factors, to deliver quality services at local level, especially in remote areas.

B. IMPROVED HUSBANDRY PRACTICES AND ANIMAL WELFARE

Locally-adapted zotechnical solutions based on agroecology and sustainable livestock practices allow improvements in animal welfare and productivity. In order to produce long-term benefits, livestock and the environment should be managed in an integrated way.

C. WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Enhancing the role women play in livestock keeping, securing their access to resources, decision making and participation in income-generating activities can greatly determine the well-being (good health, nutrition, education etc.) of household members, especially children.



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D. SUSTAINABLE NATURAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT AND AGROECOLOGY

Well-managed natural resources constitute the basis for productive and sustainable farming and livestock keeping, resulting in long-term food security for local communities and improved health of humans, animals and the environment. A holistic approach is also required to ensure that activities put in place in different sectors don't pollute or degrade the environment, as it would be to the detriment of human and animal health. In order to make optimal use of natural resources, maintain biodiversity, ecosystems balance and increase overall farm productivity, the VSF International network promotes the adoption and scaling-up of agroecology by farmers.

E. INCLUSIVE VALUE CHAINS AND ACCESS TO MARKETS

A sufficient level of income allows access to nutritious food, health services and education, which all contribute to good overall health. Support for inclusive value chains by improving the quality of the products (animal-derived food or crops) and by strengthening producers' groups or cooperatives is key to a secure income for millions of vulnerable people.

F. SUPPORT THE LIVELIHOOD OF POPULATIONS AFFECTED BY CRISIS

Response strategies to disasters and shocks (either natural or man-made) should aim to rebuild the livelihoods of the affected population and strengthen their resilience in view of future possible crisis. In this context, One Health is a powerful approach to guide multi-sector interventions and partnerships between specialised organisations who deliver complementary services.



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3. CONCLUSION

In contexts characterized by a high degree of interdependence between humans, animals and the environment and poor access to services, the challenges related to health and well-being are numerous, and require adapted solutions. Now that the One Health approach is getting more recognition and visibility, there are more opportunities to make this concept operational, involving more actors from different sectors and that way sustainably improve the livelihood of vulnerable communities in the Global South.

Successful field-based implementation of the One Health approach requires a multi-dimensional understanding of the problems and solutions, and input from different stakeholders under a transdisciplinary approach. It requires holistic, systemic approaches based on participatory methodologies to **involve local communities** and farmers organizations in the design, implementation and evaluation of the actions.

In order to make this happen, **collaboration and partnerships** are needed, especially to complement different expertise from the human-, animal- and environmental-related sectors, and to involve different types of actors, including local civil society and farmers/pastoralists organizations. The degree of success in One Health implementation therefore largely depends on the willingness of the different organizations to act collaboratively and share common goals in each specific local context.

The strategic axes of intervention implemented by VSF International produce One Health benefits as they either directly address more than one aspect of human, ani-

mal or environmental health, or because actions whose principal aim is to address one specific health risk also indirectly benefits the other two health pillars.

Implementing One Health requires an **enabling environment** to put in place practical collaborations and instituting platforms where all actors, from grassroots organisations to research centres, government representatives and international organizations exchange knowledge and practice. Donors also have a big role to play to promote an operational One Health approach when defining the development priorities and policies, and when they make decisions on resources and funds allocation.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to build an enabling environment for One Health implementation in the Global South, international organizations, policymakers and donors should:

- **Recognize** the benefits of implementing the One Health approach, which allows for cost-effective interventions (as resources are shared/mutualized to achieve multiple objectives in the human, animal and environmental pillars and efficiency and effectiveness of interventions is increased) leading to long-lasting results by considering all the interconnected aspects of a health problem;
- Include One Health as a **key component of the development policies and health strategies**, in line with the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. In parallel, put in place mechanisms to assure **coherence among policies and programmes** to avoid interventions in one sector impacting negatively on either human, animal or environmental health;
- Put in place mechanisms to **foster multidisciplinary collaborations** between actors at global, national and especially local level. This could be done through the creation of ad-hoc institutions or platforms, or simply by facilitating multisectoral partnerships through appropriate policy frameworks. Collaborations for multi-sector interventions, involving different disciplines linked to human health, animal health and environmental health should be reinforced through adequate resources and funds;
- Include in One Health interventions a **broad range of stakeholders**, from academia to technicians and practitioners such as NGOs and local actors, with special attention to the inclusion of **local communities and farmers' organizations**, who are in the frontline of food production, at the interface between animal health and productivity, sustainable management of the environment and peoples' health, and who hold a valuable set of traditional knowledge;
- Strive to **systematically include the environmental "pillar"** in the implementation of the One Health approach by focusing also on human practices that impact the environment and, in turn, affect human health.

In order to support and enhance the adoption of One Health within field interventions, research institutions should:

- Engage more in the communication and dissemination of research outcomes to a wider audience, in order to facilitate the adoption and scaling-up of adapted solutions to One Health problems;
- Develop applied research projects to tackle One Health issues, based on collaborations between researchers, NGOs and other local stakeholders and institutions.

This policy brief has been extracted from the Technical Paper "One Health implementation in the Global South: a holistic approach to address the key challenges of livestock-dependent communities".

For more in depth reading, please refer to the technical paper, available at:
vsf-international.org/one-health-implementation-paper

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VSF International is a network of non-profit organizations working all over the world to support small-scale farmers and livestock keepers. In this publication, reference to “VSF International” is used to designate all members of the network, who are directly in charge of implementing projects in the field.