



Technical Consultation on the Development of National Health Laboratory Policies

Meeting Report

Lyon, France, 26-28 April 2016



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Organization**

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Contents

1. Executive summary	1
2. Introduction	3
Opening	3
3. Background	3
4. National health laboratory policies worldwide	5
5. Reports from the WHO Regions	6
Region of the Americas	6
Eastern Mediterranean Region	7
European Region	8
South-East Asia Region	9
6. National experiences	11
Mexico	11
The Caribbean (Caribbean Community Member States)	11
Islamic Republic of Iran	12
Morocco	13
Mongolia	13
Cambodia	14
Myanmar	15
Moldova	15
7. Health laboratory policies in the context of health systems strengthening	16
Partners in developing national laboratory policy	17
World Organisation for Animal Health	17
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations	18
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (USA)	19
8. Working groups	21
9. Recommendations	22
Recommendations to Member States	22
Annexes	24
Agenda of the Technical Consultation on the Development of National Health Laboratory Policies	24
List of participants	Error! Bookmark not defined.

1. Executive summary

A Technical Consultation on the Development of National Health Laboratory Policies was held at the World Health Organization (WHO) office in Lyon, France, on 26–28 April 2016.

Laboratory systems are at the core of disease surveillance, yet laboratory capacity has often been neglected within public health systems. Many resource-limited countries have weak laboratory systems, and the oversight of laboratories is often fragmented. Additionally, focus on disease-specific programmes, all of which use laboratories, has deflected attention from treating laboratories as an element of the overall health system.

The objectives of the consultation were: to share information and lessons learned; to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats regarding the development of national laboratory policies and strategic plans; and to propose high-level recommendations to support resource-limited countries in the development of national laboratory policies and strategic plans. Consultation participants were laboratory specialists from WHO offices,¹ partner agencies² and WHO Member States.³

In plenary discussion it was discussed that that national health laboratory policies and plans should include all laboratories that in some way contribute to human health – including laboratories dealing with animal health. It is also important to align disease-specific efforts with national laboratory policies and implementation plans, taking advantage of existing structures to strengthen the national laboratory system’s capacity to produce information relevant to public health. Developing a national health laboratory policy is a valuable option for countries, where existing legislations and/or regulations does not ensure efficient and effective national laboratory system capacities.

Following plenary presentations and discussion, consultation participants were divided into three working groups to discuss a set of questions on the challenges faced by countries in developing national laboratory policies and strategic plans, and the tools and resources needed. Each working group proposed a set of recommendations, and these were refined in plenary to 6 recommendations to WHO and 6 recommendations to Member States, as follows:

¹ WHO headquarters (Geneva and Lyon), WHO regional offices for the Americas, Eastern Mediterranean, Europe and South-East Asia.

² Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, World Organisation of Animal Health, United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

³ Cambodia, Caribbean Community Member States, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Mexico, Moldova, Mongolia, Morocco, Myanmar.

Recommendations to WHO

1. Develop a global strategy to advocate for national laboratory policies.
2. Advocate with countries to designate a national laboratory focal point and national laboratory working group.
3. Update, develop and disseminate tools and guidance.
4. Create an easily accessible repository of information.
5. Support countries to mobilize resources and foster collaboration with partners.
6. Ensure mutual coordination and cooperation with FAO and OIE through the Tripartite secretariat.

Recommendations to Member States

1. Ensure the development of a national health laboratory policy with the format and scope suitable to the country context through an inclusive, intersectoral, transparent and participative process with proper coordination of all relevant stakeholders.
2. Develop a roster of national experts on all the essential elements of a national laboratory policy.
3. Nominate officially a national focal point for laboratories and communicate to WHO.
4. Examine the existing legislative framework and, if needed, establish/strengthen legislation to support enforcement of policy.
5. Allocate sufficient funding, as appropriate, for evidence-based laboratory policy development and implementation.
6. Ensure continuous monitoring and evaluation of policy development and implementation.

2. Introduction

A Technical Consultation on the Development of National Health Laboratory Policies was held at the World Health Organization (WHO) in Lyon, France, on 26–28 April 2016. The agenda of the consultation is contained in Annex 1, while the full list of participants can be found in Annex 2.

Opening

Dr Florence Fuchs

The Coordinator of the Support to IHR Capacity Assessment, Development and Maintenance Unit of WHO's Department for Global Capacities, Alert and Response welcomed participants to the consultation, pointing out that it coincided with a critical period of WHO reform. A new programme for health emergency is being developed and would incorporate the WHO Lyon office. During the Ebola crisis in West Africa, there was a shortage of diagnostic capacity in the affected countries, so that detection of infectious public health threats was weak and early warning of danger was not possible. Since future outbreaks of infectious disease in humans are expected to originate largely from zoonotic sources, stronger links between WHO, the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) will be essential in future. Representatives of both OIE and FAO were present at the consultation.

Laboratory capacity has often been neglected within public health systems. However, the consultation was expected to give guidance on how best to provide input to countries so that they can develop laboratory capacity. In many countries laboratory budgets are not sustainable as they are often not funded from within the public health system, so advice in this area was requested.

3. Background

Dr Sébastien Cognat

WHO Lyon office is part of WHO's programme on Outbreaks and Health Emergencies (OHE) which combines the area of health emergencies with response to natural disasters and crises. A major part of the programme's work is to ensure readiness for, detection of and rapid response to outbreaks of infectious diseases that may cause an international public health impact. The International Health Regulations (IHR) list a set of core capacity requirements for surveillance and response that all countries are required to achieve, and these requirements imply the provision of laboratory services. Indeed, the annual IHR monitoring questionnaire specifically asks countries whether they have "a policy to ensure the quality of laboratory diagnostic capacities".

Laboratory systems are at the core of surveillance. The Ebola virus disease outbreak in West Africa highlighted the crucial role of effective high-quality laboratories in the front line of the response. The first patient of an outbreak typically goes to a health centre, and if there is a laboratory there it should be able at least to confirm or rule out priority diseases.

However, there are weak laboratory systems in resource-limited countries, and the oversight of laboratories is often fragmented within the health system. Some disease-specific programmes have been effective in developing their laboratory component but this is not always matched by an effective overall national laboratory system. Countries may have a variety of procurement systems, varying standards and quality systems, multiple laboratory networks and differing laboratory supervision mechanisms.

In the long term, it is important to align disease-specific efforts within coherent and robust national laboratory policies and implementation plans, taking advantage of existing national structures, in order to strengthen the national laboratory system's capacity to produce information of public health relevance. Examples were given of a number of country efforts to draw up national laboratory policies but it was noted that in some cases there were discrepancies between policies and implementation. Three WHO publications on national laboratory policies and plans were introduced (from the African, South-East Asia and Western Pacific Regional Offices)^{4,5,6} and it was noted that the WHO European Regional Office had produced two journal articles on national laboratory policies.

The objectives of the technical consultation were then outlined, namely:

- to share information, experiences and lessons learned by WHO, partners and Member States about the development of national laboratory policies and strategic plans.
- to identify global strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats regarding the development of national laboratory policies and strategic plans.
- to propose high-level recommendations on the way forward to support resource-limited countries in the development of national laboratory policies and strategic plans, notably global documentation, guidelines and methodologies, as well as regional and country-level strategies for implementation, monitoring and evaluation.

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