

FAO urges global action on antimicrobial resistance

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Deputy Director-General Helena Semedo calls on European ministers to help poorer countries cope with challenge

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is an emerging public health threat requiring a globally coordinated effort to counter the risks it poses to food security, Helena Semedo, deputy director general of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) said on February 10.

Overuse and misuse of antibiotics and other antimicrobial agents foster increasing resistance among the very microbes that cause the infections and disease they were designed to quell, threatening to reverse a century of progress in human and animal health, she said.

"We have to help save life-saving drugs," she told European ministers of health and agriculture at a conference on antimicrobial resistance in Amsterdam.

Aside from the human health considerations, the emergence of microbes resistant to antibiotics and other pharmaceutical agents puts animal health at risk and consequently has an impact on rural livelihoods and food security. "AMR is a global threat that in this inter-connected world cannot be solved in Europe alone," Semedo said.

FAO's governing Conference in 2015 called for urgent action at both the national and international levels to respond to the growing threat of drug-resistant pathogens in the world's food producing systems - terrestrial and aquatic.

While resistance develops as part of natural adaptation, it is exacerbated by inappropriate use of pharmaceuticals, she said, and the prevalence of resistance in the agricultural sector is generally higher in animal species reared under intensive production systems.

Disease management is one of the tough challenges, along with climate change and urbanization, the world faces as it must increase food production to feed an expanding global population expected to reach 10 billion by 2050 the needs of the future global population, Semedo said.

AMR is a tendency organisms - often bacteria, but also fungi and parasites - have to adapt to drugs designed to eliminate them. Use of such agents extends beyond humans and other animal species; for example, oxytetracycline, a common antibiotic - is currently used in orange trees as the use of pesticides wanes.