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By Anna McKie



## Social science essential to fight infectious diseases

Animal health scientists, human health scientists and environmental scientists at an interdisciplinary health conference have stressed the importance of including the social sciences from the outset of projects.

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At the One Health for the Real World conference, held in London on 17 and 18 March, speakers and attendees stressed the importance of working with social scientists to understand the wider context of diseases they work on.

The goal of the One Health Initiative is the coordinated effort of several disciplines working at local, national and global levels to improve the health of people, animals and the environment. Researchers are usually from the veterinary, medical and environmental fields.

Delegates repeatedly returned to the need to involve social scientists in such work, saying that understanding a disease's transmission pattern, for instance, could help stop its spread. The outbreaks of Ebola and Zika were used as examples of when researchers needed to understand social factors such as poverty as well as the virus itself.

Jakob Zinsstag, head of epidemiology and public health at the Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute, said that it was important not to dismiss social scientists when searching for medical breakthroughs in epidemics. For example, social scientists can help collect and analyse data about why people travel during particular times and how this affects the spread of disease.

Salome Bukachi of the University of Nairobi, said that it was important to look not just at the culture of the communities being studied, but also of the researchers themselves. A number of speakers echoed this opinion, saying that academics needed to be more upfront about their own values. David Waltner-Toews, founding president of Veterinarians Without Borders, said that scientists should be upfront about their values and perspectives as they can affect the way data is interpreted.

Beside the benefit of working with social scientists, delegates said that working with biodiversity experts would encourage conservation in the areas in which they work, and working with engineers would help to develop the technologies needed to bring diagnostics to remote places.

*This article also appeared in Research Fortnight*

*Image: Bruce Rolff, via Shutterstock*

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