

Antimicrobial Resistance: Consumer Co-operative Actions Against the Rising Threat of Superbugs

Introduction

Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) represents today one of the most dangerous threats to humanity and a unique challenge to decision makers. It occurs when micro-organisms mutate and become resistant to antimicrobial drugs. As a consequence of these mutations, those medicines that are used currently become ineffective; the illness is prolonged and may even become life-threatening. Antibiotic resistance itself is a natural phenomenon, but the overuse of human and animal antibiotics has selected for progressively stronger resistance in bacteria.

A study conducted by the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) estimated that **33 000 people die per year** in the EU due to resistant bacteria. By 2050 deaths caused by antimicrobial resistance could be at **10 million annually** and may outnumber cancer. It follows that **AMR puts at risk the world economy, in fact it is estimated that in the EU alone it costs EUR 1.5 billion annually**. A study funded through the EU Health Programme and carried out by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates that **AMR deaths could be prevented for a cost of less than 2 EUR per person per year**, saving both lives and money within a short time after the initial investment.

AMR also jeopardizes the achievement of the **United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDGs 1, 3, 6, 8 and 12**. To ensure their attainment in the future, the availability and access to affordable and effective antimicrobials medicines, as well as diagnostic tests and vaccines, will be crucial.

Policy background

Recently, AMR has gained political prominence in the international health agenda. Following the endorsement in 2015 of a **Global Action Plan** by the World Health Assembly of the World Health Organisation (WHO), in 2016 the United Nations (UN) Member States expressed their official commitment to tackle this issue by adopting the '**Political Declaration of the High-Level Meeting of the UN General Assembly on Antimicrobial Resistance**'. Alongside these actions, the WHO, OECD, Food and Agriculture Organization and World Organisation for Animal Health are cooperating closely to **support, monitor and evaluate countries' efforts in the sectors of human health, animal health and agriculture**. Moreover, thanks to the establishment of the **Transatlantic Taskforce on Antimicrobial Resistance** parallel work is being carried out by experts from Canada, U.S, Norway and the EU.

At EU level, the 2017 EU Commission's **One Health Action Plan against AMR** represents a **significant step forward** in dealing with the AMR issue. This document followed the previous **Action Plan against the rising threats from AMR**, adopted in 2011. Alongside this, it was set up the **AMR One Health**

network. This forum brings together government experts from diverse sectors and it aims to foster mutual learning and exchange of best practices between Member States.

The year 2018 saw further progress at the EU level with the adoption of a **report of the EU Parliament on AMR** and **new legislation regulating veterinary medicines and medicated feed**. This is particularly important considering that in **the EU the majority of antimicrobials are consumed by animals**. It is expected that these new rules will effectively contribute to fight AMR by promoting responsible and prudent use of antimicrobials. For example, as of 2022 the routine preventive use of antibiotics on individual and group of animals will be restricted, and the justification of a veterinarian will be mandatory. Equally important, certain antimicrobials will be reserved for humans only. EU stewardship is crucial considering that more than 85% of the 130 countries recently assessed by the OIE have no legislation for the import, manufacture, distribution and/or use of veterinary medicines, including antimicrobial agents.

Ahead of the 11th **European Antibiotic Awareness Day** on 15th November 2018, the Commission also released the results of a new **Eurobarometer study** on the public knowledge on antibiotics and overall trends in their use. The study shows that there has been a positive evolution in the use of antibiotics since 2016. However, many antibiotics are still taken unnecessarily. Furthermore, **the burden of infections caused by antibiotic-resistant bacteria remains uneven across EU countries**. Italy, Greece and Romania have more than five times the number of deaths and disabilities due to AMR as Estonia, the Netherlands and Finland. 75% of these are due to healthcare-associated infections.

What are the most recent developments in fighting AMR?

There is an increased awareness about antimicrobial use with respect to 2016. The Eurobarometer cited above reveals that the percentage of **Europeans unaware of the ineffectiveness of antibiotics against viruses lowered from 57% in 2016 to 48% in 2018**. Although these data are encouraging, efforts to inform and educate citizens should continue and new funding should be factored into awareness campaigns, especially in Member States where percentages are lower.

There are more investments in treatments, diagnostics and prevention measures for resistant pathogens; yet, the threat posed by superbugs is on the rise. Initiatives such as the **New Drugs for Bad Bugs (ND4BB)** programme, the **Joint Programming Initiative on Antimicrobial Resistance (JPIAMR)** and the **Global Antimicrobial Resistance and Development Hub** promise to address the urgent need to bring to the market new antibiotics and vaccines over the next 10 years. However, a 2019 study jointly carried out by ECDC and EFSA and based on **data from Member States**, highlights the continued increase of superbugs resistant to antimicrobials in humans, pigs and calves. Antibiotics which for decades have been used to fight infectious bacteria that can be transmitted from animals to humans are becoming less effective. In order to make informed decisions, there is the need to strengthen the evidence base and collect more data. To this end, since the 2015 the WHO **Global Antimicrobial Resistance Surveillance System (GLASS)** has enhanced global surveillance and research.

Consumer co-operatives are addressing AMR

Different stakeholders have different roles to play in tackling AMR and consumer co-operatives grouped in Euro Coop have certainly taken up this challenge very seriously. Operating on an established set of values and principles among which 'Education, training, and information' (5th Co-operative Principle) and 'Concern for the Community', (7th Co-operative Principle), they are best

placed within the retail sector to address AMR in an effective and systemic way for the benefit of their consumer-members and society at large. Actions in this regard encompass, for example, imposing measures on their suppliers for the reduction of antibiotic use and investing in research and development to assess current levels of antibiotics used in a certain supply chain.

Specifically, in 2017 **Coop Italy** started the campaign [Alleviamo la salute](#) which aims to combat antibiotic resistance in animal husbandry by improved animal welfare and biosecurity. The campaign put in place an actual revolution in terms of management practices in over 2.000 farms. In the last two years, this set of measures has been implemented in the rearing of around 30.000.000 animals. Specifically, bovines and pigs are raised without the use of antibiotics in the last 4 months, while laying hens and poultry (including turkey) received no antibiotics at all. Coop Italy extended its commitment to its own brand fish, which is raised without antibiotics in the last 6 months. Also, industrial products such as cold cuts and products with important % of eggs (like pasta) follow the same rules. Moreover, since 2016 Coop Italy has reviewed its Breeding Codes by introducing rules which go beyond EU legislation, as well as best practices for a sustainable use of veterinary drugs and in particular of antibiotics. In cases where medication is deemed necessary, the Breeding Codes indicates how to make a responsible use of drugs while (1) protecting animal welfare, (2) guaranteeing the quality of meat and its origin, and (3) combating antimicrobial resistance.

Coop Denmark has taken the strong and ambitious position of demanding that suppliers do not make use of antibiotics as a prophylactic measure or for the sole purpose of supporting animal growth – thus anticipating the recent EU provisions mentioned above. Although this position comes with enforcement and monitoring challenges, Coop Denmark is of the view that there simply is no other way and that society as a whole must play its part in this global issue. Coop Denmark has also invested heavily in organic meat with which it is guaranteed a reduced use of antibiotics (on average, 10-20 times less) and improved sustainability and animal welfare. Similarly, **Coop Norway is committed to selling only antibiotic-free chicken** and has also pledged to providing consumers with narasin-free¹ chicken.

Coop Sweden has for many years been working to [reduce unnecessary antibiotic use](#) in meat production. To this end, only suppliers who are able to **prove responsible use of antibiotics** are selected. To ensure that these requirements are really complied with, Coop Sweden controls the production throughout the food chain, right down to the farm level.

The **S Group** in Finland has been involved in important educational campaigns, via blogs for instance, which inform consumers about antibiotic resistance. Given the high market share of the S Group in Finland, the media is particularly interested to find out how the S Group acts on the issue.

All own-brand meat and poultry products sold at **the Co-operative Group** in the United Kingdom come from animals for which the [use of antibiotics was not allowed](#), unless there was an approval from a veterinarian to address a certain health issue. This co-operative has also introduced a new method of monitoring called '**Average Daily Dose**' which has helped farmers and vets **reducing the use of critically important antibiotics by 45%**. The Co-operative Group has been collaborating with other grocers, vets and official bodies like the Responsible Use of Medicines in Agriculture Alliance, who have set targets for the reduction, refinement and replacement of antibiotics and the Food Standards Agency, who carry out regular check-ups.²

¹ Narasin is classified as a feed additive in Europe and is used to prevent the development of bowel disease in chicken. It is however classified as an antibiotic in other regions, which is why Coop Norway has banned its use in the feed of their chickens.

² More info are available at: <http://www.co-operativefood.co.uk/globalassets/food-matters/co-op-animal-welfare-standards--performance-and-co-op-antibiotic-policy.pdf>

Since 2018, as part of their sustainability and health policy, Eroski committed to reduce the use of antibiotics in animals reared for its Natur brand products. By strengthening cooperation with its suppliers, in 2019 Eroski certified Natur brand chicken as slow-growing and raised without antibiotics.

Euro Coop's members' **AMR policies put at its core not just human health, but the well-being of the animals** as well. This is in fact an essential **prerequisite to reach their ambitious standards** in reducing the use of antibiotics. As a result, farmers are required to implement all the necessary structural measures to ensure both higher animal welfare and hygiene standards. These, together with a thorough knowledge of supply chains, adequate management of the farm – in terms of facilities and equipment, and an optimal animal feeding guarantee the best results for fighting AMR. More resilient animals are less susceptible to disease as confirmed also by the European Medicines Agencies and the European Food Safety Authority in the [2016 Joint Scientific Opinion](#) on reducing antimicrobials in food-producing animals.

Are we doing enough to tackle AMR?

There have been several improvements in recent years; however, **considering the scale of the problem, these have to be considered just the first steps in the right direction**. Systemic solutions able to stop AMR and, eventually, curb the current trends are still missing. Importantly, given that bacteria do not stop at borders, the attention that AMR is receiving at the global level should be maintained. Collective containment efforts are therefore strongly needed. Stakeholders from civil society should also be guaranteed a greater engagement in shaping AMR EU and national policies.

By prioritising the health and well-being of their consumer-members, **consumer co-operatives grouped in Euro Coop are committed to continue their active engagement in fighting AMR** and to liaise with institutional and food supply chain stakeholders in order to bring about the desired results. **Euro Coop is also among the numerous signatories of the [Joint Statement on AMR](#) developed by the 2016 AMR Thematic Network of the EU Health Policy Platform.**

Euro Coop strongly supports the prioritisation of AMR in the current European and global public health agenda and the **Consumer co-operatives welcomed the 2017 One Health Action Plan against AMR**. As the root causes of AMR are a multitude of existing practices in different fields, designing AMR policies by embedding cross-sectorial activities is crucial. Euro Coop also appreciates the [progress in the implementation of the first deliverables of the plan](#), such for example the adoption of [EU Guidelines on the prudent use of antimicrobials in human health](#).

In spite of this progress, the development and implementation of national action plans (NAPs) is still a challenge. Although **NAPs are an essential step for countries to contain and eventually arrest the spread of AMR**, Euro Coop points out that not every EU Member State has a NAP. Moreover, there is no harmonisation among these. There is therefore the need to ensure NAPs keep pace with recent scientific developments and that the 'One Health' approach is at their core, guaranteeing that the link between the health of humans, animals and ecosystems is always taken into account. NAPs shall also have **clearly defined quantitative or qualitative targets and benchmarks**, so as to measure achievements systematically.

As highlighted by the EU Parliament's resolution mentioned above, another issue regards the EU resources available to tackle AMR, where **accessibility and information remain inadequate**. Euro

Coop also joins other NGOs in calling for more dedicated funding to be made available to the relevant agencies through the **Multiannual Financial Framework**.

Conclusion

Taking into account the numerous parallel initiatives and projects, an obvious concern is **how to ensure there is no duplication of efforts among the different actors and dispersion of information**. Currently, the EMA, EFSA and ECDC together with DG SANTE share competency in addressing the issue. While their regular communication and alignment remain crucial, the designation of a single body at the EU level responsible for overseeing all activities related to AMR and acting as main point of contact for stakeholders, NGOs and citizens would improve the exchange around best practices and existing shortcomings.

To conclude, **Euro Coop recommends that the political attention directed to AMR globally will not just be maintained but increase with the view to stop and eventually curb the spread and misuse of medicines**. All countries must recognize that increasing drug resistance undermines the success of all health policies, as well as initiatives in several other public sectors. **Fragmentation of efforts is currently the main challenge; therefore a strategy based on synergies and co-ordination at every level is key**. In this respect, **consumer co-operatives are already addressing this issue** as it has a direct impact on consumer health and well-being. As such, Euro Coop calls on all stakeholders – ranging from the government, consumers, farmers, the industry, and retailers – to play their part in order to tackle this important public health threat.

About Euro Coop

Euro Coop is the voice of the co-operative retailers in Europe. Our association brings together **the national associations of consumer co-operatives in 20 European countries**, which represent **7,000 local/regional co-operatives, employing 700,000 citizens across Europe and operating 76,000 points of sale** which serve **34 million consumer-members daily**. Euro Coop's members together are Europe's second strongest retail force – accounting for **€ 76 billion in annual turnover from sales**. Euro Coop's Secretariat in Brussels represents the interests of its members before the European Institutions and facilitates the inter-member exchange between the national associations. More information is available at www.eurocoop.coop.

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