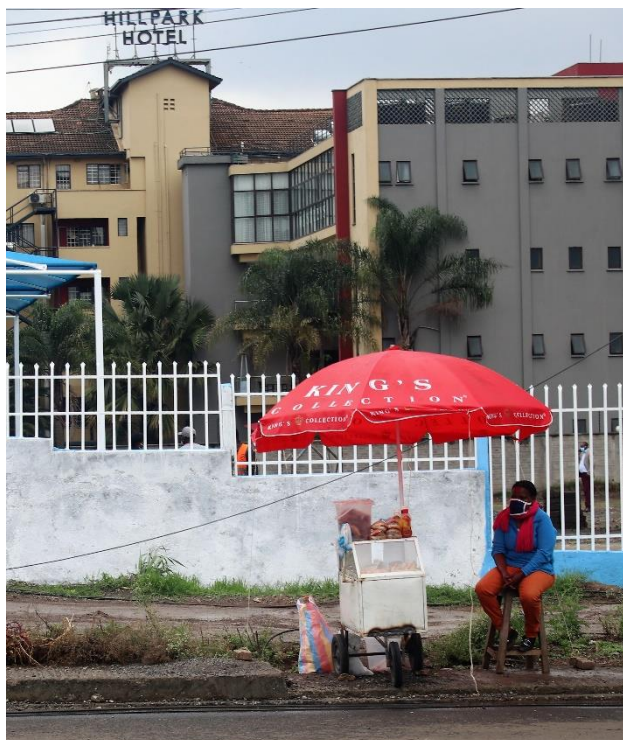


## A word from the sub-regional representation in East Africa

It's Thursday morning, and ready to 'go to work', I don my mouth/nose mask, and put my laptop under my arm (it comes home with me every night these days, you never know when Government is going to shut us down). Thankfully no one crosses me on the staircase, I get into the car and off I go. Traffic is non-existent and in no time I've arrived at the Taj Towers, with parking bays aplenty for once. I take an empty lift to the 4th floor. Door security : check, hand sanitiser : check, connect the laptop : check, see who else is in the office : check.



This, in short, is life under a wishy-washy lockdown, being constrained, but not really. At least if you still have a job and a roof over your head, that is.

Kenya still allows a decent amount of movement; while the Kenyan Government encourages people to work from home, going to work is not prohibited and most businesses are still open, whether 'essential' or 'non-essential'. The particularity is that Nairobi is cut off from the rest of the country (and so are other major urban centres, such as the port city of Mombasa) as if it were a huge **containment zone** of 6–8 million souls. (Refer to the Glossary of the *Terrestrial Animal Health Code* for more information.)

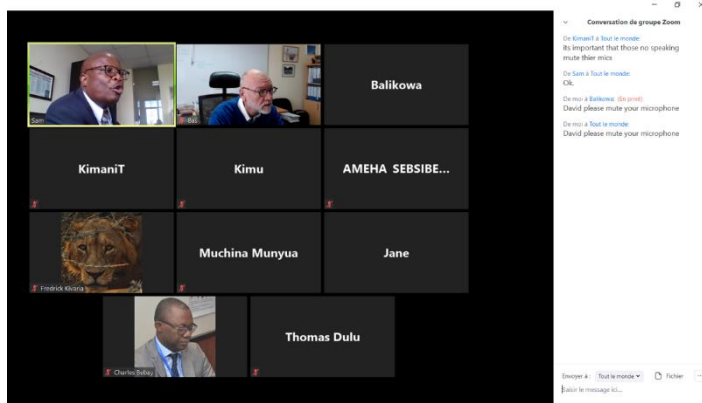
*Scratching a livelihood together selling sweets and samosas in front of the office building*

Also, at night, the whole of Kenya goes into lockdown, with curfew lasting from 7 pm to 5 am. And that's no laughing matter. So far, more people have died from heavy-handed enforcement of the curfew by the police than of the actual disease.

These are times when one gets the time to sit down and actually think things through for more than a nanosecond. I just finished reading the 2018 (!) *Zero-by-30 Global Strategic Plan*; never had the time before. And the list is long. Finally, I know what this *Tripartite Zoonotic Guide* is about.... Most of the capacity-building events

and policy or coordination meetings in the region have been cancelled, postponed or are at the very least under review on a daily basis to assess whether they will go ahead. What is problematic is that this region was the last to become affected and it is likely that by the time everyone in Paris is clogging up the terraces again, we will still be facing 'the music'.

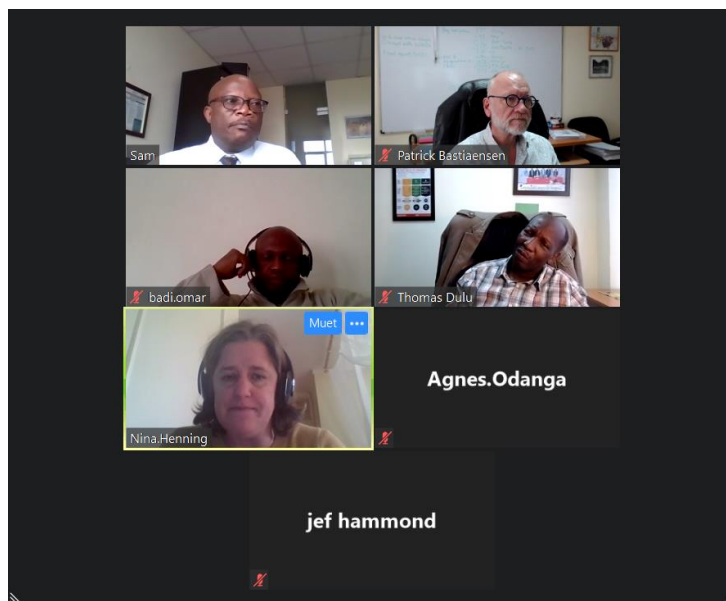
*Zoom conference call with Eastern Africa animal health*



How do you organise meetings bringing together Africans, Europeans and (often also) Americans under those circumstances?

Like everyone else, we turned to Zoom a while back. The horrors of Skype-for-Business and WebEx are but a distant (bad) dream. So, at a rate of one, two or three meetings a day, we try to keep the momentum going and, honestly, I wouldn't mind if many of these interactions remain 'virtual' in the future. So much more time efficient!

Next we'll start using TikTok....

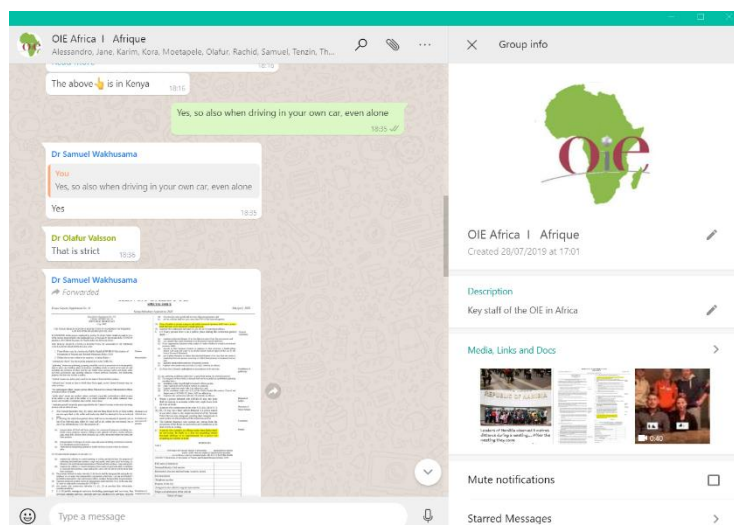


Zoom conference call with Eastern Africa GALVmed AgResults project  
(development and roll-out of foot and mouth disease vaccines in Eastern Africa)

Thankfully, we invested rather heavily in IT and electronics last year (thank you European Union) and are now left mainly with acquiring better microphones, the Achilles' heel of teleconferencing, besides the Internet of course....

**This is 2020 and this office was established ten years ago. 2020 was supposed to be a year of celebration of the achievements, looking back on a successful decade....**

I haven't talked so much to my family in years, as I have now, but the same could be argued for the OIE family in Africa. After we ran into some problems trying to contact OIE staff on a weekend when participants *en route* to a meeting were left stranded, an OIE Africa WhatsApp group was set up in late July 2019; it includes all



Our OIE Africa WhatsApp group is taking off...

technical and administrative staff of the OIE in its four African offices. This group has been very active ever since and no more so since the outbreaks started appearing in Africa. We were almost relieved that eventually 'even' Botswana was sharing the COVID-19 burden... It has fundamentally changed the ease and frequency with which OIE staff in Africa interact, and is like we are standing around a coffee machine chatting.

And as often occurs around the coffee machine, debates are not always 'scientifically sound'...

I often wonder what life would've been like if COVID-19 had struck mid-year, say June 2020? The beginning of the year is always a bit slow, the time of year when records are filed, annual reports have to be compiled, either institutionally, or for projects, and all kinds of red tape is renewed. Not usually the busiest time of year in terms

of travel or regional meetings. So when the Kenya Government decided to impose a strict curfew on 27 March, bearing in mind that in Nairobi, you know when you're leaving for home, but you never know when you'll make it home, OIE staff were advised to work from home as much as possible and check in once or twice a week. So today, I am with two colleagues and our messenger Daniel, quietly slaving away dispatching 2 metric tonnes (!) of training manuals to English-speaking African countries.



Meanwhile I am figuring out how we can persuade Member Countries to take a decision on the confidentiality status of ten-year old PVS reports and Thomas has to explain to GALVmed that the FMD PCP Roadmap meeting for Eastern Africa is being postponed. Then Samuel gets a telephone call from a long-lost friend. How can the OIE help to reduce the stench caused by a piggery in a slum, right next to the upmarket residential area where she lives? The caller is concerned that pigs might transmit COVID-19, primarily through odours. He has barely hung up the phone, when another call comes in: someone's concerned that many people who may be COVID-19 positive and showing no clinical symptoms may be transmitting the disease to livestock, does the OIE have a test for COVID in livestock?

*Our messenger Daniel, preparing the shipping of 500 sets of PRAPS Animal Health Manuals to all corners of Africa, as soon as cargo services resume*

Another caller enquires if Sam could join a Zoom meeting to discuss the virtual delivery of Veterinary Services during this time of crisis and also to lobby the Kenyan Cabinet Secretary of Agriculture, Livestock and Fisheries to

formally recognise Veterinary Services as essential services during the COVID-19 pandemic. An earlier publication in the Government's official gazette had not considered Veterinary Services as essential and several vets were arrested as they worked during curfew hours (e.g. performing calvings). We all begin to realise that COVID-19, though bad, is increasing the visibility of the OIE, though perceptions may sometimes be misguided.

Meanwhile the pressure is on to kick-start new, approved projects (funded by Germany and the United States of America) and, if at all possible, to recruit personnel to start implementing them. More Zoom calls are in the offing ...

And how do you engage in setting up a twinning agreement between two laboratories without at least an exchange visit? Zoom, Zoom, and Zoom again...

While most regional and international organisations have quickly adjusted to 'Zooming, let there be no mistake: Chief Veterinary Officers, Delegates, in this region were not particularly well prepared for this virtual world and we have lost contact with many of them. When you have to pay for phone credit and data bundles from



your own pocket to be able to do your job as a Director of Veterinary Services, priorities may shift....



*Taj Towers in Upper Hill, Nairobi. The OIE office is situated on the 4th floor but is off limits to visitors for now*



Although the office does not welcome visitors any longer, delivery services are still coming in and going out and are requested to use hand sanitiser upon entry. All staff/offices have been supplied with hand sanitiser and surgical masks as prescribed by Government directives.

*Masks and sanitiser at the reception desk*



*Holding the fort.... Thank you, Sam*

So it's Thursday evening, Sam and I make our way to the car park. Remembering to bring our facemasks with us, the Government requires the wearing of facemasks even in a private car while driving alone. And by the way, you are not allowed to carry more than two family members in a private car, and they must also wear a mask! So while they might be protected from COVID in the car, it is not entirely clear what happens when they reach home. Interesting how this COVID-19 is shaping policy and impacting our daily lives.

Also, today we learned a new term: ‘corona fee’: bribing police to not get in trouble for not wearing a mask...

**While we all try to maintain some semblance of normality and remain upbeat, we are after all very privileged citizens and temporary visitors, our thoughts are with the many sufferers of the disease in our host country, Kenya. We are mindful of those suffering as a result of the counter-measures: those who have lost their jobs, who are prevented from hawking, who are in compulsory quarantine, who have fled the floods in their thousands as a result of the abundant rains, the stir crazy children who haven’t gone to school in weeks (and their parents), the families ripped apart by the urban–rural lockdown measures and the farmers who must face-off the second wave of a desert locusts of biblical proportions, with enormous risks for the food security in this otherwise magnificent country. Keep safe, keep at the recommended distance, and *kwa heri* or adieu...**

*We wish to thank Patrick ‘Bas’ Bastiaensen and colleagues from the SRR East Africa for submitting this article to the OIE News Team.*

■ OIE In-house Times – 8 May 2020