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Agriculture in the Twenty-first Century: Challenges and responses

New responsibilities in the face of new challenges

National Agricultural Health and Food Safety Services

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the Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures of the World Trade Organization (WTO/SPS), the signing of free trade agreements and other external factors, such as bioterrorism, biotechnology, environmental protection, etc.

In the last decade, it became clear that the traditional approach was insufficient to come to terms with the new challenges. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy, dioxin contamination in Belgium, foot-and-mouth disease in the United Kingdom and avian influenza in Asia are examples of major sanitary problems that can be traced and linked to the introduction of adulterated foods, but manifest themselves further down the agrifood chain.

As a result, in 2000 the Commission of the European Communities issued a white paper, in which it stated that the best way to guarantee a high level of food safety was by creating an independent food agency.

The European Food Safety Authority was created in 2002 to protect consumer health, and restore and maintain public confidence, which had been undermined by the sanitary problems that occurred in the 1990s.

In response to the events of 9/11, the U.S. authorities also enacted the Public Health Security and Bioterrorism Act, which granted the FDA new powers to control food imports and reduce the terrorist threat. Under the new regulations, a country's exports may be rejected or additional tests or treatment required.

The challenges and opportunities for AHFS services

In the current situation, national AHFS services need a wider international vision and a broader mandate. Agricultural health has traditionally been the responsibility of ministries of agriculture but the organizational structure now needs to be revamped to include closer alliances and more integration with ministries of health, trade and foreign affairs.

Traditional agricultural health and food safety (AHFS) programs began on the borders of a given country and focused on what occurred within it. The general goal was to protect domestic agriculture, with resources being used to control the agents that caused diseases and pests that affected primary production.

The credibility of AHFS services with the private sector and other countries was based on the effectiveness of their programs at the domestic level, continuous inspection and surveillance, and their response to unforeseen emergencies. The goal of inspection systems, ports of entry and surveillance was to prevent the introduction and spread of undesirable diseases or pests.

In recent years, however, new demands have been placed on AHFS systems as a result of globalization,

In the past, the general goal of traditional agricultural health and food safety (AHFS) programs was to protect domestic agriculture.

The extent to which national AHFS services are strengthened will depend on the priorities of each country. However, close links between the public and private sectors are the starting point for any modernization process in that formal or informal intersectoral communication mechanisms are developed to facilitate dialogue, analysis and the identification and prioritization of needs among the different stakeholders.

The first area that needs to be developed in this process is the institutional framework. It is here that national interests in the sanitary and phytosanitary field are represented and defended, agreements are implemented and the commitments assumed at the international level are fulfilled. Communication channels are also established at the intersectoral and interinstitutional levels, and the system is made financially and technically sustainable.

The second area to be addressed is the regulatory framework, which promotes the modernization of legislation (laws, regulations, decrees, standards) to bring it into line with international regulations (Codex, IPPC, OIE) and establish the rights and duties of the stakeholders.

Finally, there is the technological framework, which makes both the public and private stakeholders more efficient and involves actions in the field of surveillance, quarantine and diagnosis. The resources available for this framework are limited, so identification and prioritization efforts are needed, and the possibility of regional investments should be considered.

IICA's Agricultural Health and Food Safety Program

MISSION

To assist Member States in strengthening their animal health, plant health and food safety services, including their capacity to develop and comply with international norms and standards, in order to compete successfully in national and international markets and help safeguard consumer health

To carry out its mission successfully, IICA places emphasis on meeting the infrastructure requirements of national services, especially with respect to the capacity of countries to develop international norms and standards and comply with them. Accordingly, the Institute's work is geared to two specific actions:

I. Support for the efforts of national AHFS services to develop regulatory mechanisms, science-based technical capabilities and sustainable institutional infrastructures

National AHFS services now have to be sufficiently strong and sustainable to protect animal and human health, maintain consumer confidence and evaluate risks.



IICA has concentrated its actions on strengthening the infrastructure of national services, especially in the area of improving the performance of government services and the capacity of countries to develop international norms and standards and comply with them.

The Institute has focused its efforts on helping the countries to evaluate the progress made in improving the performance and quality of their national AHFS services. In a strategic partnership with the Office International des Epizooties (OIE), it prepared an instrument known as Performance, Vision and Strategy (PVS), designed to evaluate the operation of national veterinary services based on a vision shared by the public and private sectors. It will be used to determine the strategic actions that government services need to implement to improve and boost their performance.

The results will help establish a cooperation agenda for the agencies and countries taking part in this effort, based on the priorities and needs identified by the public and private sectors.



Based on a mandate issued by the Central American Council of Ministers of Agriculture, this instrument is being applied jointly with the national services. Results have so far been obtained for five of the seven countries in Central America, and the global results for the region should be ready by the end of year.

The PVS is available for other countries in the Americas to use. A similar instrument is now being prepared to evaluate plant health and food safety services.

II. Work with the Member States to implement the provisions of the WTO Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures, and the decisions adopted by the international standard-setting organizations (OIE, IPPC, and Codex Alimentarius)

The Initiative for the Countries of the Americas in SPS, a joint effort involving IICA and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, was launched in 2002. Its objective is to strengthen the institutional capabilities of the countries so that they may play a more active role in the SPS Committee. The approach enables the participants to share experiences, promotes the presence of experts at SPS Committee meetings and fosters the development of national capabilities.

Between June 2000 and June 2002, only 15% of the countries of the hemisphere were represented at SPS Committee meetings. Between October 2002 and June 2004, this percentage rose to 95%. The program promoted interinstitutional participation to facilitate close ties between the technical personnel of different ministries.

Prior to the meetings of the SPS Committee, workshops were held to develop institutional capabilities, in order to promote interaction among the participating countries and the sharing of national experiences through the study of successful cases.

The success of the activity is due to cooperation and the synergy that exists among the countries. They have been the protagonists in technical cooperation, identifying and selecting the issues to be addressed. The fact that the same group of people continue to be involved in the activity and share their experiences, combined with the countries' commitment to this activity, helps optimize resources.

If the efforts to increase the participation of the countries in the international forums are to have a lasting effect, parallel actions must be implemented at the national level to develop the institutional framework needed to manage and implement the SPS Agreement.

AHFS services now have to be sufficiently strong and sustainable to protect animal and human health, maintain consumer confidence and evaluate risks

Conclusions

When properly structured and maintained, AHFS programs offer very significant benefits in various areas, ranging from primary production to public health, tourism, trade, competitiveness, food security and the environment.

To obtain those benefits, broad support must be promoted throughout the agrifood chain. A concerted effort is required from the public and private sectors, and support from financial institutions and technical cooperation agencies to enable the countries to tap the opportunities not seized in the past. IICA's efforts have been concentrated in this direction.

The last decade demonstrated that the traditional approach to AHFS programs was insufficient to come to terms with the new challenges