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A REGIONAL MECHANISM FOR AGRICULTURAL HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY IN THE CARIBBEAN

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ABSTRACT: The demands of globalization, commitments under the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreements on Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Measures, the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) and greater public scrutiny of quality and safety of produce are forcing countries to rethink their agricultural health and food safety policies and actions. Agricultural Health and Food Safety (AHFS) must now reflect a broader mandate and an expanded vision building on traditional agricultural health services within the Ministries of Agriculture to include stronger alliances and integration with Ministries of Health, Trade, and External Affairs and adopting a systems approach which involves links with producers, operators of agribusiness and food industries. Actions taken not only, should assure a strong and productive agricultural economy, but also increase trade and competitiveness, improve food safety, promote health, advance food security and tourism, and enhance environment stewardship. AHFS organizations must obtain the confidence of those they serve and that of their trading partners. To obtain this confidence requires the active participation of all parties across the entire agri-food chain. There must be a shared responsibility and coordinated approach on the part of public and private sectors to ensure that all of the stages in the agri-food chain are identified, that decisions are based on scientific criteria, that regulations are consistent with international standards, and that all parties recognize the impact of AHFS policies and actions. In this paper, we discuss a modern national agricultural health and food safety system and suggest an approach to regional cooperation and coordination which will contribute to the Regional discussions.

INTRODUCTION

Agricultural health and food safety (AHFS) programs have in the past been geared towards the protection of domestic production through the prevention of entry of exotic pests and diseases (pests), implementation of emergency actions in the event that these exotic pests enter the country, and the conducting of treatment strategies to control or eradicate already established pests. Overall responsibility for implementing the programs rested on the Government with limited or indirect support from the private sector.

The new trends toward globalization, greater public scrutiny of quality and safety, concern for the environment, and the expanded role of AHFS are forcing countries to rethink their AHFS policies and actions. This paper describes the new environment and its implication to AHFS services. It notes the current status of AHFS institutions in the region and promotes the concept of a modern National AHFS system suggesting an approach to regional cooperation and coordination to add to the ongoing discussions in the region.

THE NEW TRENDS

Developments in international trade brought about by agreements under the World Trade Organization (WTO) aim at facilitating trade. The WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Measures gives countries the right to protect their human,

animal and plant health but in a manner that will not inhibit trade. It also requires that countries base any SPS trade restrictive actions on scientific principles. SPS measures are being discussed at other trade negotiations such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), the Cotonou Agreement between the European Union and Africa, Caribbean, and Pacific Group, and the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME), which seeks to deepen and widen Caribbean Integration.

There is greater scrutiny by the public of the quality and safety of foods for human consumption. Production is geared toward what the market demands rather than toward expecting customers to consume what is produced. Consumer and advocacy groups are seeking for more to be done to protect the environment and minimize the risk to human health from inputs used in agricultural production. Increased recognition is being given to the environmental impact from agricultural practices including pest control methods in plants and animals. Agriculture as a result has to seek and adopt the most environmentally compatible pest control technologies available.

Advances in technologies are also to be noted. The growth in information technology has allowed for greater understanding and precision in conducting risk assessments and making policy decisions when dealing with pests. At the same time, biotechnology promises to increase the quality and quantity of the food supply by reducing the levels of pest damage and residues of chemicals. However, these benefits for health and the environment are being met with uncertainty and doubt as to their long-term adverse effects.

Increasingly demands are being made on the AHFS, but countries are conscious of the need to reduce public expenditure. The private sector is being asked to get involved to reduce that dependence on direct public sector funds. Cost recovery systems are becoming a necessity.

THE IMPORTANCE OF AHFS INSTITUTIONS

The importance of AHFS programs in agricultural production has been well recognized but the impact of effective AHFS programs extends beyond production to other areas such as food security, trade, agricultural competitiveness, tourism, public health, and the environment.

In the area of food security, many of the countries are net importers of food and this is expected to increase as the countries try to meet growing domestic demands. AHFS institutions must be able to facilitate imports to meet domestic demand while not putting domestic production at risk. Trade and AHFS are interdependent. AHFS regulations, standards, and actions should serve to facilitate imports and exports of agricultural goods.

The level of agricultural competitiveness of a country can often be measured by the level of investment in the AHFS institution. A country with a weak AHFS institution will be unable to protect itself and its trading partners. This inability will affect the level of production and the confidence of the trading partners in the produce they receive.

Tourism is also closely linked to AHFS programs. IICA (2003), citing a report by the Caribbean Epidemiological Centre (CAREC) of outbreaks of food borne illness in various Caribbean tourist destinations, indicated that a Salmonella outbreak in a certain Caribbean country in 2000 affected six hotels with temporary closure of one hotel and a threat of United States travel advisory. There are reports that Pink Hibiscus Mealybug was first introduced on the island of Margarita and unknowingly carried by tourists to the South American Continent.

AHFS can also affect public health from problems that can emerge at any point along the production, processing, transportation, and storage stages of the agri-food chain. For example, food borne diseases may occur if produce is washed with microbial contaminated water and then eaten raw. Produce may be harvested with high residue levels of pesticides if the harvest period is not adhered to after the application of a pesticide.

The type of AHFS programs can have an impact on the environment. Pesticides for example, have been known to contaminate ground water. Organisms which were not considered pests can achieve pest status when the natural enemies are killed by the indiscriminate use of chemicals.

STATUS OF AHFS INSTITUTIONS IN THE CARIBBEAN

IICA (2002) reported on various studies (IICA Surveys in 1997 and 2000 and USAID/CARICOM Study 1999/2000) conducted to assess the status of compliance of the national AHFS systems with the WTO Agreements on SPS Measures in the Caribbean. The studies focused on the following:

a) Capabilities and capacities of national AHFS delivery systems.
b) Capabilities and capacities to identify and respond to emergencies and emerging issues.
c) Agricultural health and food safety legislative framework in compliance with international standards.

The report (IICA, 2002) concluded that the assessment of the countries' AHFS showed a fairly good level of effort in all three areas of human, animal or plant health, but in general programs are not all up-to-date with international standards. In order to conform with and benefit from international standards, AHFS institutions must be modernized. This modernization will require making fundamental changes in these institutions and enhancing their capacity and capabilities in AHFS. Unless changes are made, the outcome of poorly performing AHFS programs as measured in terms of loss of market opportunities and adverse effects on the animal, plant, and human health of the countries will increase.

A MODERN NATIONAL AHFS SYSTEM

Traditionally, AHFS Programs have been focused only at the national level. The objectives have been to protect domestic agriculture with resources being channeled into controlling pests that could adversely affect primary production. AHFS programs were evaluated on the basis of the efficiency of its inspection, surveillance, and emergency response to unexpected entry.

It has been recognized that this traditional approach is not always sufficient to meet today's challenges. It has been shown that problems manifested at the consumer level can be traced back further down in the agri-food chain. Programs are developed and implemented that go beyond the farm level to encompass the entire agri-food chain. Therefore, AHFS institutions must operate with an expanded international vision and broader mandate. The traditional agricultural health institution within the Ministry of Agriculture must be restructured to include stronger alliances with the ministries of health, trade, environment, and foreign affairs. The private sector must join forces with the public sector to define complimentary roles for which each has specific responsibilities in order to enhance AHFS.

The members of a modern National AHFS System are the Ministries of Agriculture, Health, Environment, Trade, and official services of other Government Agencies responsible for decision making, provision of services, and verification and certification in matters related to plan and animal health and food safety; the associations of producers, agribusiness operators, chemists, veterinarians, agronomists, and other related professionals; public and private sector laboratories which diagnose pests, conduct analyses for residues and verify and certify agricultural chemicals, veterinary products, animal feed, and conduct microbiological and toxicological analyses of agricultural products; laboratories for quality control of agricultural

products; agricultural input suppliers and service providers and importers and exporters of agricultural products.

ESTABLISHMENT OF A MODERN NATIONAL AHFS SYSTEM

Establishing a modern national AHFS system begins with the articulation of the complementary roles of the public and private sectors. There must be a coordinated approach as success or failure of the AHFS programs is a shared responsibility. There are certain public sector roles that cannot be delegated and have to be kept by the respective Ministries of Agriculture, Health, and Trade. These non-delegated roles include establishing laws and standards based on international legislation; overseeing and ensuring compliance by applying sanctions in cases of non-compliance; and actively negotiating in the country's best interest within the relevant international organization and standard setting fora.

The delegated roles can be played by producers, agribusiness operators, professionals, universities, and private laboratories. Capabilities of other national institutions can be used as needed as well as those of universities and institutions of other countries through alliances or cooperative agreements with a view of enhancing existing capabilities. A national advisory council consisting of representatives of the private and public sectors involved in AHFS at the national level should be established. Additionally, advisory committees on animal health, plant health, pesticide control, and food safety involving representatives of the participating institutions and the private sector should be formed and serve as a forum for discussions and planning on various issues related to AHFS. Other national sub committees may be established as necessary. At the local district level, it may be necessary to establish district committees involving representatives of associations of producers and local government personnel for funding and execution of AHFS programs in the area. The public should be informed of SPS measures through the national enquiry points. Training programs should be implemented for producers and other persons who could be accredited to carry out the functions.

Financial support to AHFS institution must focus not only on building technical capacity but also on strengthening regulatory mechanisms and institution sustainability. Therefore self-financing mechanisms must be established for the operations of the animal health, plant protection, and food safety services. Technical assistance must be planned within the countries and areas and based on their determined priorities. The contents of training programs and the approaches used in providing training and technical assistance must be jointly evaluated and the products and delivery methods modified accordingly. Technical cooperation agencies must make a concerted effort to work together.

THE REGIONAL MECHANISM

There is no doubt that not all the technical expertise, information, laboratories, and other necessary facilities can be found in one country but it is possible to draw on the required expertise and facilities in other countries. This calls for effective cooperation and efficient coordination.

Structure. The structure proposed consists of four separate regional committees (plant health, pesticide control, animal health, and food safety). Membership of each of these committees should comprise the Chairmen of the National Committee for plant health, pesticides control, animal health, and food safety. There will be annual meetings of each of the Committees rotated among the countries. The Chairman of the host country's Committee will serve as Executive Chairman for one year or the duration of the period between annual meetings.

Meetings of Special Regional Sub-Committees or networks within a Regional Committee may be convened as necessary.

Countries will be responsible for funding their participation in the annual meetings. Regional organizations, agencies, and regional private sector interests will be invited to participate in the meetings.

Coordination of Committees can take place through a Coordinating Secretariat consisting of a professional for the four Regional Committees housed in an existing regional organization or agency and funded by that body and others in the short-term. The person is a member of staff of the organization or agency, and the Secretariat forms a part of the duties. Alternatively, the Secretariat can consist of a professional for each Regional Committee who is a member of staff of a regional organization or agency, and the Secretariat is part of the duties. Funding in the short-term will be from the organization or other agencies. In both cases in the long-term, the countries would be expected to fund the Secretariat.

Function. The Regional Committees should be a mechanism of collaboration and cooperation among the National AHFS systems to promote a common understanding through sharing of information, resources, technology, and expertise. There should be good communication among the countries, the Secretariat and regional and international organizations. There should be a harmonized system of technical procedures, information, and exchange legislation. Some functions may be discrete and will have specific life phases. Some of these functions include:

- Training, education, and public awareness
- Coordination of resources, networking
- Development of projects for funding
- Interfacing with regional and international organizations
- Any other activity that may be approved

Financing. Financing should be through contributions from technical agencies and other corporate groups in the short run, but in the long run funding should be from the various countries. This finance should be from contributions and payments for services. Additionally, the secretariat will develop specific projects for which funding will be sought. The necessary mandate should be given to accept funds and gifts from accredited donors including private sector organizations to assist in execution of functions.

CONCLUSION

Effective AHFS programs are important to the level of agricultural economic growth of a country. As countries are heavily dependent on agriculture, it is necessary to build and sustain efficient and effective AHFS institutions to achieve prosperity. The scope and operation of AHFS institutions and the risks and rewards to a country as a result of globalization, are much greater than before. A concerted effort at collaboration between the public and private sector together with assistance of financial agencies and technical cooperation agencies will enable countries to take advantage of the opportunities not realized before. An AHFS system must earn the confidence of its citizens and its trading partners through its policies and the actions taken. Strong AHFS Systems will guide the Regional Mechanism.

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