



PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION  
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION



## **14th INTER-AMERICAN MEETING, AT THE MINISTERIAL LEVEL, ON HEALTH AND AGRICULTURE**

*Mexico City, D.F., Mexico, 21–22 April 2005*

---

*Provisional Agenda Item 14.2*

RIMSA14/20 (Eng.)  
21 March 2005  
ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

### **AGRICULTURAL HEALTH AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL DEVELOPMENT**

**Presented by**  
**Dr. Chelston W. D. Brathwaite**  
**Director General**  
**Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture**  
**(IICA)**

1. The availability of sufficient and safe food is fundamental for good health and productivity, as well as providing the foundation for progress and the alleviation of poverty. Food-borne illnesses and foreign agricultural pests, however, slow this progress by causing negative social and economic impacts. Sustaining efficient and effective agricultural health and food safety institutions and services, which can protect the public health and maintain access to export markets, is a critical component of national policy that is needed in order to achieve greater national prosperity.

2. For the vast majority of developing countries in the Americas, the overall level of development and economic growth is directly related to improvements in health and agriculture. In low-income countries, food expenditures command a significant portion of total income and agriculture employs the vast majority of the work force. Basic agriculture employs more than half the population of people in developing countries, and accounts for one-third of the GDP. In Central America, 48% of all exports derive from agriculture.<sup>1</sup>

3. The challenges we face at the beginning of this new century just to supply enough safe food for our world's growing population are daunting and will require a transformation of global agriculture. The revised UN population report released last month now estimates the world's population will rise from 6.5 billion today to 9.1 billion by 2050. This is a 40% rise in population, and virtually all of that growth will happen in developing countries. The world is now looking to the Americas to meet these future nutritional challenges. With the world's last large tracts of undeveloped agricultural lands, South America, led by Brazil, is quickly turning the interior regions of the continent into the world's new breadbasket.

4. Responsible agricultural development is the foundation of good public health, food security, and commerce in developing countries. Increasing agricultural production and increasing exports does help to drive prosperity and rural development. But without firm controls it also can lead to increased risks to human health and problems associated with food safety and agricultural health. Globalization has spurred more efficient international agricultural production, food processing, and global food distribution networks. As these networks increase and become more interdependent, so does their ability to rapidly distribute food-borne diseases, toxins, and pests that pose serious health risks and can disrupt international trade due to food safety, regulatory, or quarantine disputes.

5. In industrialized countries, the World Health Organization reports that the percentage of people suffering from food-borne diseases each year is up by 30%. While less well documented, developing countries bear the brunt of the problem due to the presence of a wide range of food-borne diseases, including those caused by

parasites. The high prevalence of diarrheal diseases in many developing countries suggests major underlying food safety problems. Agricultural health and food contamination problems create an enormous social and economic burden on communities and their health systems.

6. In the 1980s, the import share of additional food supplies required to satisfy the nutritional requirements in Latin America and the Caribbean averaged around 30%. It has been projected that this will be 47% or higher by 2009. Increased buying power from export earnings, lower tariffs, and improved import capacity combined with rapid population growth has made Latin America and the Caribbean one of the most food import-dependent regions in the world.

7. In order to continue enhancing or maintaining the current levels of public health, food security, and rural development, national agricultural health and food safety services must be prepared to facilitate increasing amounts of imports and exports to meet both growing human and commercial demands, while still providing protection to human health and evaluating risks so as not to endanger domestic production.

8. Traditionally, national services have been reactive to problems, beginning at a country's borders and focusing inward with the overall mission to protect domestic agriculture from disease and pests. It is now widely recognized that these traditional approaches are not sufficient to respond to today's global health and food safety challenges, opportunities, and risks. Each country must now work harder to prevent illness and pests from entering and leaving their borders as well as rapidly responding to resolve problems throughout the entire agri-food production chain.

9. In the Americas there are approximately \$125 billion in agricultural exports and \$85 billion in imports facilitated by either agricultural health or food safety regulations, standards, norms, or actions such as inspection. In the United States alone, close to 4 million imported food shipments from more than 100 different countries are received every year.<sup>3</sup> The majority of these shipments come from the Americas and are being subjected to increasingly strict food safety, quality, and agricultural health regulations that exporters must comply with.

10. But we must remember that the second largest export market for Latin America is trade between Latin American countries, where borders are more porous and inspection controls fewer. Where there is nearly 50,000 km of shared-land borders that can be nonexistent to diseases and pests. There are an estimated 120 million visitors and tourists that come to the Americas each year from all over the world, each one with the possibility of accidentally introducing a new disease or

agricultural pest. SARS, West Nile virus, bird flu, hoof-and-mouth disease, hog cholera, soy bean rust, and the citrus disease leprosis are just some recent examples.

11. Awareness is growing that national services must be ready as the first defense against existing and emerging national and international agricultural health and food safety problems and that actions to address them must be taken comprehensively on both the national and regional levels. Additionally, since diseases and pests do not respond to political pressure, the technical decisions and actions to control them must be based on scientific principles and not modified to meet political considerations. In today's world where parts of food production cycles can take place in multiple countries and on different continents, the challenges are even greater than before.

12. However, most Latin American and Caribbean countries have yet to adopt and implement new strategic visions for their agricultural health and food safety services beyond that of the traditional services already provided. National services are under pressure from increasing threats and market forces to operate with expanded mandates, greater international awareness, and increased technical capabilities, while generally continuing to receive inadequate resources. These vital institutions in developed and developing countries must be given the support to continue to strengthen and evolve in order to confront the new realities of globalization in the food production chain.

13. The complex nature and wide impact of food safety and agricultural health issues are also forcing national services to become more proactive, extending their services, influence, and coordination with other agencies to look beyond primary production. Their strategic visions must also consider other nontraditional areas that are also impacted by agricultural health and food safety issues—such as public health, tourism, international commerce, the environment, food security, and biological security.<sup>4</sup>

14. A recent World Bank report on agricultural health and food safety challenges in developing countries clearly determined that “Food safety and agricultural health risk management should be considered as a core competence in the competitiveness of developing countries, especially in the context of trade in high-value food products.”<sup>5</sup> If it is not, continued institutional weaknesses and increasing agricultural health and food safety compliance costs will only further marginalize weaker economic players, including smaller countries, enterprises, and rural farmers.

15. As countries try to reduce their dependence on traditional commodities and process more of their products for export or plant nontraditional crops, they find that requirements that protect food safety and agricultural production are becoming increasingly more important. Not only in the interest of preventing serious incidents

of food contamination and the economic losses from disruptions to exports, but also in regard to remaining competitive and defending national interests. We have seen that just as free-trade agreements start to lower tariffs and import quotas on agricultural products, standards, quality regulations, labeling requirements, and certifications are increasingly being used as de facto barriers to trade.<sup>6</sup>

16. If scientifically justified, harmonized standards and clear regulations are powerful tools needed in each country to protect human and agricultural health. In many countries, there have been significant increases in the incidence of illnesses caused by microorganisms propagated primarily by food, such as *salmonella*, *Campylobacter* and new deadly strains of *E. coli*. Chemical contaminants also continue to be a significant cause of food-borne illnesses, including natural toxins, such as mycotoxins, marine toxins, and environmental contaminants, such as mercury, lead, and pesticides.

17. The list of highly publicized events concerning food safety and human health continues to grow and examples of various types can be found in both developed and developing countries. Each event or outbreak affects consumer choices and importers' confidence in trade with affected countries by raising questions as to the abilities of the official services and private sector to safeguard public health and certify the sanitary and phytosanitary states of the agri-food sector.

18. Industries in developing countries that rely heavily on one export market, or one or two major agricultural products, will not be able to easily recover from the economic impacts of a market closure due to regulatory disputes, or loss of their consumer base due to an outbreak of food-borne illness. In less developed countries, the economic consequences of a serious food-borne human health threat or foreign agricultural pest or disease could be sufficient to affect overall economic development and exacerbate rural poverty as well as food availability.

19. The reemergence of cholera in an Andean country in 1991 created a public health crisis but also resulted in the loss of US\$ 500 million in fish and fishery product exports that year.<sup>8</sup> The clearest example of the economic impacts due to loss of confidence in food safety is BSE. Since May 2004, it is estimated that losses to the US\$ 7 billion-a-year Canadian beef industry due to BSE have reached US\$ 5 billion.<sup>7</sup> In this case, the Canadian government has been able to offer some monetary assistance to the industry, but similar losses to a developing country's primary export could be devastating to the economy.

20. Our nations must continue working together to ensure that everyone has access to safe and healthy food and that developing countries are not subjected to unjustified trade restrictions. As members of the World Trade Organization, each country of the

Hemisphere must meet the obligations set forth under the Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement. The SPS agreement establishes the international mechanisms countries can use to deal with agricultural or health crises and provides ways for nations to retain access to markets.

21. Under the SPS agreement, sovereign states are protected from arbitrary or permanent sanctions imposed by other nations against an agricultural product without scientific justification. This is why it is so important that nations continue their participation in this WTO committee. Thanks to a recent IICA program, initially funded by the USDA with additional IICA support, the last three SPS committee meetings have had over 95% attendance by OAS member states. Some 70% of the trade issues now discussed in the SPS committee are either raised directly or supported by the Americas.

22. The international standard-setting bodies for human, animal, and plant health are equally important. Countries are strongly encouraged to actively participate in the Codex Alimentarius, the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE), and the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC). Increasing the amount of international standards can help to lower conflicts and confusion between differing national regulations by establishing easily adoptable minimum human health, agricultural health, and quality standards based on sound science. These international standards also allow countries to better evaluate their risks based on scientific principles and respond quicker to sanitary and phytosanitary issues.

23. The increase in agricultural health, food safety, and related trade disputes has generated greater publicity, helping to focus international attention on this critical issue. This increased awareness should be seen as an opportunity to push for increased modernization and institutional collaboration to enhance the effectiveness and stability of food safety institutions and human health services in Latin America and the Caribbean.

24. We can make great progress, but only by promoting hemispheric food safety solutions, having strong political leadership, improved communications between health, agricultural and other ministries, increasing public/private sector collaboration, as well as increased assistance from developed countries and international institutions. Without this change, national services will continue to stretch already thin resources to meet their daily operational needs, even as demands on them and the threats to human health and food supplies increase.

25. IICA is working hard to support its member countries to improve their capabilities and facilitate the modernization of national food safety services. IICA is working to strengthen the abilities of national services to increase the quality of

agricultural exports, better evaluate and manage risk from food safety and agricultural disease issues, to modernize institutions to better protect their public health and food supplies, as well as to increase their participation and influence in international trade and standard-setting organizations.

26. To assist in this effort, IICA and the OIE jointly developed the Performance, Vision, and Strategy (PVS) instrument for institutional modernization for national veterinary services. This modernization tool guides countries' institutions in establishing their current level of performance, and creates a shared vision with the private sector on how to best establish priorities and facilitate strategic planning. This is with a view to making the best use of budget resources and taking full advantage of new opportunities. Because of its effectiveness, this instrument was adapted for national food safety services in a collaborative effort with PAHO and harmonized with the FAO/WHO standards for food safety systems so as to not duplicate institutional efforts.

27. These modernization instruments can be very useful tools for countries to characterize institutional and operational capabilities, to measure advancement, and define strategic actions in technical cooperation. In this regard, IICA works with its members to assist their national services in four fundamental areas so that countries can:

- bring together human talent and economic resources that give the national services the institutional and financial sustainability to produce results.
- coordinate and integrate private sector participation in executing operations and carrying out joint activities and actions.
- strengthen capabilities to overcome health, sanitary, and regulatory barriers in order to facilitate and energize agricultural commerce and market access.
- improve the technical capability and modernization of their national services to better implement sanitary measures through the use of scientifically supported methods and internationally recognized procedures.

28. Each nation in our Hemisphere has its own culture and institutional infrastructure. But the common thread that is behind most positive changes in all countries is the political will and the leadership of key individuals. IICA, with its network of national offices and regional specialists works within the political realities of each country to support these leaders and promote positive change. IICA also works to facilitate greater regional and hemispheric dialogue by sponsoring and participating in international forums, through direct government contact and by coordinating with other international organizations.

29. The problems facing nations today are more complex and require expanded technical understanding of the direct and indirect impact the state of a nation's agricultural health and food safety has on various sectors, especially human health. In recognition of this need for a more multidisciplinary approach and greater collaboration between the agriculture and health sectors on both the national and international levels, IICA and PAHO have been increasing their cooperation to promote health and agricultural prosperity in the rural communities of the Americas. Together our complementary missions in this area will serve to increase hemispheric protection for human, animal, and plant health in the Americas.

30. IICA is committed to assisting national governments in implementing modernization efforts in agricultural health and food safety agencies that will allow nations to increase rural development and quality of life by better protecting human health, agricultural production, and economic development. We know from experience that our nations can work together in hemispheric cooperation to ensure that all of our people have access to the nourishing food that is so fundamental to social and economic well-being.

## References

- <sup>1</sup> IICA 1999. Sistema de Información del Área de Políticas y Comercio. San José. C.R. s.p.
- <sup>2</sup> USDA Economic Research Service, *Food Security Assessment*, GFA-11-Dec 1999.
- <sup>3</sup> General Accounting Office, Food Safety: Overview of Federal and State Expenditures 4 (2001) GAO Report.
- <sup>4</sup> Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA). 2002. “The Expanded Roles for Agricultural Health and Food Safety Systems,” prepared by the Agricultural Health and Food Safety Program, San Jose, Costa Rica.
- <sup>5</sup> *Food Safety and Agricultural Health Standards: Challenges and Opportunities for Developing Country Exports*. The Poverty Reduction & Economic Management Trade Unit and Agriculture and Rural Development Department, World Bank, Washington DC. January 10, 2005.
- <sup>6</sup> Allen M. Field, *The Standards Maze*, Journal of Commerce, Commonwealth Business Media. January, 2005.
- <sup>7</sup> Statistics Canada. February 17, 2005. [www.statcan.ca](http://www.statcan.ca)
- <sup>8</sup> World Health Organization fact sheets.  
<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs237/en/>

---