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**CENTRAL AMERICAN REGIONAL COOPERATION IN HEALTH AND
AGRICULTURE—CATALYTIC ROLE OF THE SPECIALIZED REGIONAL
AGENCIES**

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ACRONYMS USED

CABEI	Central American Bank for Economic Integration
CAC	Central American Agricultural Council
CATIE	Tropical Agricultural Center for Research and Education
CCAD	Central American Commission on Environment and Development
CEPREDENAC	Coordination Center for Natural Disaster Prevention in Central America
COMISCA	Council of Central American Health Ministers
CRRH	Regional Committee on Water Resources
CSUCA	Central American University Council
DR-CAFTA	Dominican Republic-Central America-United States Free Trade Agreement
ENSO	El Niño-Southern Oscillation
FANCA	Central American Network for Action on Water
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FEMICA	Federation of Central American Municipalities
FNS	Food and Nutrition Security
FONSAN	Regional Fund for Food and Nutrition Security
GWP	Global Water Partnership
H.CIRSA	Honorable Regional International Committee for Health in the Agriculture and Livestock Sector
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
IICA	Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture
INCAP	Institute of Nutrition of Central America and Panama
ITCR	Regional Joint Technical Entity
IUCN	World Conservation Union
JICA	Japan International Cooperation Agency
OCAS	Organization of Central American States
PAHO	Pan American Health Organization
PRESANCA	Regional Program for Food Security for Central America
RIOPPAH	International Regional Organization for Plant Protection and Animal Health
SE-CAC	Executive Secretariat, Central American Agricultural Council
SG-CECC	General Secretariat, Central American Educational and Cultural Coordination
SG-SICA	General Secretariat, the Central American Integration System
SIECA	Secretariat for Central American Economic Integration
SISCA	Secretariat for Social Integration in Central America
USDA	United States Department of Agriculture

INTRODUCTION

1. The purpose of this document is to provide a brief review of regional intergovernmental coordination in the health and agriculture sectors in Central America, and of the catalytic role of the specialized regional agencies in achieving and strengthening this coordination.
2. To this end, first, the document reviews the institutional structure of the Central American Integration System (SICA) to determine whether or not the community regulatory framework favors regional interaction in the health and agriculture sectors.
3. Next, it determines whether this community regulatory framework has been taken advantage of through consensus building between the two sectors in these priority areas for joint work at the regional level and what support has been provided by the specialized regional agencies for implementing this intersectoral agenda.
4. Finally, the document presents a series of conclusions and recommendations considered important for the deliberations of the panel “International Cooperation on Emerging Issues in Agriculture and Health”, at the 14th Inter-American Meeting, at the Ministerial Level, on Health and Agriculture, taking place in Mexico City, 21-22 April 2005.

REGIONAL INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR COORDINATION BETWEEN THE HEALTH AND AGRICULTURE SECTORS

5. In 1991, the Tegucigalpa Protocol to the Charter of the Organization of Central American States (OCAS) created the Central American Integration System (SICA), whose the highest policy-making body is the Meeting of Presidents of the member States. SICA has links to all the organs and institutions connected with regional integration.
6. SICA establishes sectoral councils of ministers, based on areas of competence, and provides needed and coherent coordination between them, for which intersectoral ministerial meetings were established.
7. Thus, sectoral councils have been operating in the Region for several years, both in the area of health (Council of Central American Health Ministers, or COMISCA) and agriculture (Central American Agricultural Council, or CAC). For implementation of their agreements, the two councils have executive secretariats, which in turn receive significant technical cooperation from specialized international organizations.
8. For the past three years, the Central American Agricultural Council has taken advantage of the institutional community regulatory framework to hold regional

intersectoral meetings with Ministers of Economy and Foreign Trade, Environment, and Health.

9. The First Intersectoral Meeting of Ministers of Agriculture, Health, and Environment was held in Guatemala in June 2004, with the objective of drawing up a work agenda for issues of priority interest for the three sectors. The issues selected for the joint effort were: i) integrated management of water resources, ii) food security, and iii) modified living organisms, biotechnology, and biosafety.

10. In addition to these issues, as a result of agreements reached at the XXII Summit of Central American Presidents, held in Costa Rica in December 2002, the agriculture and health sector have carried out joint efforts with respect to disaster prevention and mitigation in general and the phenomenon of El Niño in particular. Furthermore, as a result of agreements at the First Intersectoral Meeting of Ministers of Agriculture and Ministers of Environment, held in Costa Rica in April 2003, the agriculture, health, and environment sectors have also coordinated regional activities in the area of safe management of dangerous chemical substances.

11. In order to move forward and coordinate actions in each of the areas of mutual interest, there has also been support from the sectoral secretariats, with the participation of various regional and international organizations that have shown a willingness to advance interagency coordination efforts to meet the objectives set by the intergovernmental bodies within the framework of SICA.

CURRENT STATUS OF THE INTERSECTORAL AGENDA AND COOPERATION FROM REGIONAL AGENCIES

12. The principal regional cooperation activities established jointly by the health, agriculture, and environment sectors are described below, along with the support provided to each of them by the specialized regional agencies.

Central American Strategy for Integrated Management of Water Resources

13. Water resource are one of the key items on the Central American intersectoral agenda. Water is the basis of life. It is an indispensable, finite, and vulnerable productive resource.

14. The Intersectoral Councils of Ministers of Agriculture, Health, and Environment have expressed their intention to seek joint solutions to problems associated with the availability of water resources and their use and management, as well as the degradation of water quality. In response to the challenge posed by this issue, CCAD, CAC, and COMISCA have joined forces to draft a Central American Strategy for Integrated Management of Water Resources. This strategy lays down the broad policy guidelines

that the programs of each country of the Isthmus will follow--guidelines that will make it possible to meet specific targets and objectives to guarantee the sustainability of these resources and satisfaction of the needs of humans and ecosystems, as well as the economic and productive development of the Central American nations.

15. For the design of this strategy, an interagency team was formed, headed by the Secretariats of CAC, CCAD, and COMISCA. Other participants include the Regional Committee on Water Resources (CRRH); the Tropical Agricultural Center for Research and Education (CATIE); the Global Water Partnership (GWP), the World Conservation Union (IUCN), and the Central American Network for Action on Water (FANCA).

16. Furthermore, at the national level, staff from the three sectors (agriculture, health, and environment) have been designated to facilitate the consultation processes required for the drafting of the regional strategy.

17. The following advances stand out among the accomplishments of this interagency team: i) drafting of the strategy proposal, ii) creation of a website that serves as an operational instrument to facilitate the preparation and dissemination of the strategy; iii) specific international cooperation; iv) national workshops on “Local, National and Regional Coordination for Water Resource Management in Central America,” and v) support and participation in the Central American Water Forum “Progress, Threats, and Challenges for Integrated Water Management in Central America.”

Food and Nutrition Security

18. Despite the investments that the countries of the Region have made with support from international cooperation, progress in this area has been inadequate, and there are still large sectors of the population experiencing acute problems of food insecurity. At the regional level, it is estimated that one out of every two Central Americans does not manage to meet his or her needs, a situation that is even more serious in the rural sector, where the figure is two out of every three.

19. This situation has made it necessary to rethink current priorities and policies. In this regard, at their XX Summit in December 2002, the Central American presidents established the “Strategic Framework for Addressing the Food Insecurity associated with Drought and Climate Change.”

20. As a response to this presidential agreement, the Regional Joint Technical Entity (ITCR) was formed to facilitate interagency coordination of technical and financial cooperation for the promotion of food and nutrition security (FNS). This entity is mandated to become a source of support for the governments of the Region to promote a policy for managing and optimizing investment, both regional and from international cooperation, to promote the regional agenda established at the Presidential Summits and

Ministerial Councils on food and nutrition security. The ITCR has a coordinating group, in which the following participate: SE-CAC, SISCA, CEPREDENAC, INCAP/PAHO, CRRH, CABEI, FEMICA, SG-CECC, and CSUCA.

21. At the intersectoral meeting of Central American Ministers of Agriculture, Health, and Environment, in June 2004, among other agreements, the Ministers instructed the Secretariats of their Ministerial Councils to provide technical cooperation, with technical assistance from INCAP/PAHO, in order to:

- Strengthen food and nutrition programs and program components for attention to priority groups, in the agriculture, environment, and health sectors,
- Strengthen capacities and competencies for the development and management of FNS programs (Training in Management and FNS),
- Facilitate the creation of the Regional Fund for Food and Nutrition Security (FONSAN), to allow for development of projects to follow up local, national, and regional efforts to fight the poverty that produces hunger and malnutrition,
- Develop a regional information system and the regional observatory for food and nutrition security, as part of a network of national and local information systems and observatories, to be strengthened or established depending on the situation in each country,
- Link actions in the area of food and nutrition security with the actions of the Central American Strategy for Integrated Resource Management, among others.

22. In order to follow up on these actions, in addition to the participation of the ITCR, approval and implementation of the Regional Program for Food Security for Central America (PRESANCA) was recently obtained, with cooperation from the European Union. Other actions are being carried out with support from FAO, USDA, and friendly governments.

23. In this same spirit of cooperation, on 28-29 April 2005, the Regional Seminar “Investing in Food and Nutrition Security to Reduce Extreme Poverty” will be held in El Salvador. It is hoped that the Ministers of Agriculture and Health will participate in this event, which is being organized jointly by SISCA, SE-CAC, and INCAP.

Modified Living Organisms, Agricultural Biotechnology, and Biosafety

24. With the support of an interagency group made up of IICA, RIOPPAH, and CATIE, in coordination with the secretariats of CAC, COMISCA, and CCAD, regional proposals were prepared for: i) a Regulatory Type Framework on Modified Living Organisms for use in the agriculture and livestock sector, ii) a regional strategy for agricultural biotechnology, and iii) a project to strengthen national capacities in biosafety through reciprocal cooperation among the countries of Central America.

25. The support of experts from Costa Rica, Mexico, Colombia, and El Salvador was available for the preparation of the proposal for a Model Regulatory Framework for use in the agricultural sector. Regional consultations and a national review were carried out among the agriculture, health, and environment sectors. The final version of this proposal will be presented at the next Intersectoral Meeting of Ministers of Agriculture, Health, and Environment.

26. The purpose of this regulatory framework is to enable countries that do not yet have such guidelines or regulations to adopt common basic elements, or in cases where the countries do have such guidelines, to enable them to modify their existing frameworks and move toward regional harmonization.

27. With respect to the Regional Strategy for Agricultural Biotechnology, the objective is to coordinate and strengthen national and regional action to secure access to and safe use of agricultural biotechnology products, as well as optimizing and harmonizing management, legal frameworks, and policies for improving food and agriculture systems, the quality of life, conservation, and the sustainable use of biodiversity, environmental protection, and strengthening the economy.

28. In addition, the project to boost national capacity in biotechnology through reciprocal cooperation among the Central American countries includes the following components:

- Regional Institutional Management
- Information and dissemination
- Methodologies for the design of national policies, institutional systems, and programs
- Training in biosafety practice
- Institution-building through a regional network of biosafety professionals.

Reduction of Vulnerability to Natural Hazards

29. Central America is a subregion exposed to a variety of recurrent natural hazards. The Central American countries are concentrated in a relatively small geographical area in which a natural hazard commonly affects several or all the countries and sectors at the same time. These hazards respect no borders, and both vulnerabilities and their causes tend to be shared. Furthermore, many of the potential solutions for reducing vulnerabilities and the impact of disasters can be useful to more than one or even all the countries and sectors. This favors a regional and intersectoral approach to the problem.

30. At the regional level, working partnerships for risk management have been established between the agriculture and health sectors. An example of this joint effort is the regional workshop on El Niño - Southern Oscillation, held at the SG-SICA offices. In

addition, sharing of experiences has been facilitated between the health and agriculture sectors for the preparation of sectoral planning documents within the framework of the Regional Plan for Disaster Reduction. This is intended to lead to a preventive rather than a reactive approach to disasters, in contrast to the past.

31. These activities have been carried out with close coordination among the secretariats of the Ministerial Councils of Agriculture and Health, CRRH, CEPREDENAC, INCAP, and PAHO.

32. In addition, several events for coordination and the monitoring of El Niño - Southern Oscillation (ENSO) have been held at the regional level, including specialized seminars organized by the Executive Secretariat of the CAC in several Central American countries, with the participation of representatives from the health and agriculture sectors, among others.

Safe Management of Hazardous Chemical Substances

33. In August 2002, representatives of the Ministries of Agriculture, Health, and Environment, responsible for regulation and policies related to hazardous chemicals, began defining areas of mutual interest for regional and national consideration of this issue and recommended developing an intersectoral work plan, that would include the following:

- review and updating of regional commitments for the elimination of substances included in the International Conventions and regional Agreements; establishing synergies and complementarities, while taking as a framework national and international legal and institutional advances;
- establish a Regional Program for Safe Management of Toxic and Dangerous Substances;
- have a Regional Policy for Safe Management of Hazardous Chemical Substances, which implies formulating regional positions on processes for monitoring and negotiation of International Conventions;
- create a Regional Technical Committee for Hazardous Chemical Substances as a regional entity to follow up and facilitate coordination of compliance with international and regional conventions.

34. In addition, work is currently under way on the creation of a regional training center for the appropriate use of chemical substances, in which the environment, agriculture, and health sectors would also be involved.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

35. The legal framework and institutional arrangement of the Central American Integration System (SICA) facilitate intersectoral treatment of subjects of mutual interest among different Ministerial Sectoral Councils, particularly Health and Agriculture.

36. In Central America, there is a concerted, active agenda for regional work among the health, agriculture, and environment sectors on the issues of water resources, food security, modified living organisms, reduction of vulnerability to natural hazards, and safe management of hazardous chemical substances.

37. Not yet included within the agreed areas for joint work by health and agriculture at the regional level are: a) the prevention and control of zoonoses and b) food safety. Both areas should be an urgent priority for the countries of the Region to address jointly, thus strengthening and coordinating the action under way at the national level.

38. Emerging zoonoses affect relations between countries through their public health impact and consequences for the international market in animals and food, often leading to suspensions of exports. Furthermore, food safety is a priority in order to reduce risks of transmitting diseases to the population and to help promote tourism and the international food trade.

39. In addition to their importance *per se*, the two areas are a priority for multinational and intersectoral cooperation among countries that are moving rapidly to form a Customs Union and negotiating or implementing Free Trade Agreements. The DR-CAFTA is of particular importance, given the magnitude of the two-way trade in agricultural products and food.

40. The specialized regional agencies play a very important role in supporting the regional intersectoral agenda in health and agriculture, since they make it possible to:

- Coordinate the preparation of proposals with a regional vision
- Support the holding of regional technical and political meetings
- Follow up and support actions agreed regionally by governments
- Seek international cooperation resources for regional action to complement country resources
- Establish synergies among their work programs to prevent duplication and maximize the use of resources
- Serve as an institutional memory and as links among governments

41. Nevertheless, at the last meetings of the Ministers of Agriculture of the Central American region, there was continued concern about avoiding duplication of activities and achieving wider and better organization for international technical cooperation, in

order to obtain greater benefit and performance from the available resources in general and with particular regard to agricultural health.

42. In this regard, the strategic partnerships and signing of interagency agreements such as: IICA-PAHO; RIOPPAH-IICA, and RIOPPAH-PAHO/INCAP are a good starting point. However, they need to be turned into concrete work plans that are agreed and implemented in coordination with the relevant regional intersectoral bodies (intersectoral meetings on health, agriculture, and environment).

43. In this respect, it is also appropriate to mention that by agreement of the Ministers of Agriculture of the region (Resolution No. 4 of the XXXIV Special Meeting of the H.CIRSA, held in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, Mexico, on 11 November 2004), a meeting was recently held (on 12 April 2005, at RIOPPAH headquarters) to coordinate cooperating agencies in the area of health in agriculture. In addition to RIOPPAH, representatives from the following attended: INCAP/PAHO, IICA, Inter-American Development Bank, SICA, CAC, CABEI, SIECA, FAO, USDA, JICA, the Republic of China, and Spanish Cooperation. The objective of the meeting was to reach basic agreements for regional coordination on behalf of the Central American countries and for better utilization and value for money in common areas of intervention.

44. Finally, it should be pointed out the complexity of issues related to food and agriculture makes it necessary to link them to other fields such as trade and the environment. This poses the challenge of multiple intersectoral coordination with other sectors, for which coordination and support from the specialized regional agencies is also indispensable, as clearly has been the case in Central America.

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