



PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION



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

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**REPORT ON THE 4th MEETING
OF THE PAN AMERICAN FOOD SAFETY COMMISSION
(COPAIA 4)**

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1. The 4th meeting of the Pan American Food Safety Commission (COPAIA), convened by the Director of the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), was held in the Conference Hall of the Mexican Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the 20th of April, 2005.
2. The officers consisted of a president, a vice-president and a rapporteur.

Officers

- President: Dr. Graciela Rosso, Minister of Health from the Health and Environment Ministry of Argentina.
- Vice-president: Mr. Ernesto Perdomo, Director of the General Directorate of Environmental and Public Health at the Health and Social Development Ministry of Venezuela.
- Rapporteur: Dr. Anne Mackenzie, Science Advisor to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency.

3. Dr. Mirta Roses served as the Secretary *ex officio* of the meeting and Dr. Albino Belotto as Technical Secretary.

Participants:

4. The following people represented their respective regions:

North America:

5. Dr. Anne Mackenzie, Science Advisor at the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, Dr. Julio José Frenk Mora, Health Minister at the Mexican Health Ministry, Mr. Fabián Vásquez Villalobos, Food Safety Coordinator for the State Plant Health Committee of Mexico and Dr. Carolina Smith DeWaal, Director of Food Safety at the Center for Science in the Public Interest of the United States.

English-speaking Caribbean Region

6. Mr. James Paul, Chief Executive Officer, Barbados Agricultural Society, Hon. Dave Burgos, Minister of State, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries of Belize, Dr. Josette Bijou, Public Health and Population Minister, Haiti, Mr. Robert A. Best, Caribbean Poultry Association, c/o Livestock and Livestock Products Board of Trinidad and Tobago.

Central America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean Region:

7. Dr. Rolando Mateo Cabrera Marquetti, Specialist for the Vice-Ministry of Hygiene and Epidemiology at the Public Health Ministry of Cuba, Mr. Mariano Jiménez Talavera, Minister of Agriculture and Cattle Farming from the Ministry of Agriculture and Cattle Farming of Honduras, Dr. Estela Emilia Berliza de Ramírez, from the Dominican Republic.

Andean Area:

8. Mr. Luís Chávez, Food Unit of the Consumers Organization- SEDECO of Bolivia, Mr. Christian Wahli, President of the Association of Food and Beverage Manufacturers of Ecuador, Mr. Ramón Ernesto Perdomo, Director of the General Directorate of Environmental and Public Health at the Health and Social Development Ministry of Venezuela.

Southern Cone:

9. Dr. Graciela Rosso, Health Minister for Argentina, Mr. Jaime Alfonso Campos Quiroga, Minister of Agriculture for Chile, Dr. Cláudio Roberto Gonçalves Martins, Executive Director of the Brazilian Association of Chicken Producers and Exporters and the Brazilian Association of Pork Production and Exporting Industries, Dr. Raquel Sánchez, Nutritionist from the Consumers Organization of Uruguay.

Sessions

Inauguration:

10. The delegates elected Dr. Graciela Rosso, Health Minister at the Health and Environment Ministry of Argentina, as president of the meeting; Mr. Ernesto Perdomo, Director of the General Directorate of Public and Environmental Health at the Health and Social Development Ministry of Venezuela, was elected as vice-president; and Dr. Anne Mackenzie, Science Advisor to the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, was elected as rapporteur.

11. Dr. Mirta Roses Periago, Director of PAHO, welcomed the delegates by stating that COPAIA is a forum unique in the world, where public and private sectors have the opportunity to examine problems, progress, limitations and innovations in the area of food safety. She then said that food safety and innocuousness are fundamental to ensuring each individual's right to have access to nutritional and innocuous food, as consecrated in the United Nations Declaration on Human Rights and ratified at the International Conference on Nutrition, Rome, 1992. The innocuousness and safety of food, she said,

contribute to achieving the development goals of the millennium, particularly as regards a reduction in hunger and poverty, a reduction in the impact of child morbidity and mortality, and in the areas of education and sustainable development. Although precise figures are not available, the direct and indirect economic impact of diseases associated with the consumption of contaminated foods is estimated to be high on a global, regional and national level, especially among more vulnerable populations. PAHO's cooperation program falls within WHO's global food safety strategy, while taking into account the special characteristics and specific problems of the Region of the Americas. The program will make increasing use of risk analysis to classify and prioritize dangers and risks, and will be more oriented toward developing strategies to handle and communicate risks. Education regarding the innocuousness of food and manuals for the implementation of the five keys to food safety within the framework of the healthy environments strategy will receive special attention. The Director highlighted collaboration with the Food and Agriculture Organization, the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture and other international organizations that promote national food safety systems. She also underlined the importance of including all the sectors of the food chain: the public sector and the private sector, not forgetting the important role played by consumers and producers. Over the last few decades, she said, PAHO has been operating mainly through the Pan American Institute for Food Protection and Zoonoses (INPPAZ), the Pan American Food Safety Commission (COPAIA) and advisors in each country under the Veterinary Public Health Program.

12. In light of the new Regional Program Budget Policy approved in 2004, debate at the heart of the Work Group PAHO for the 21st Century on the management strategy to be followed by PAHO in the 2003-2007 period, we have begun the process of reviewing all institutional mechanisms, including those of governance. A strategy for the Pan American Transaction Centers is currently being discussed, she said, adding that new opportunities and new forms of technical cooperation are being created. In this context, she continued, we have initiated talks with the government of Argentina for the redefinition of INPPAZ.

13. She emphasized that the will and political decision of the Member States to allocate resources and promote their mobilization and coordination on a national, regional and global level is a condition sine qua non if we are to progress toward the common objective of reducing the health, social and economic repercussions associated with diseases that cause diarrhea and that are transmitted via food and water, and the presence of microbiological and chemical contaminants.

14. She concluded by stressing that this Commission, unique in the world, has the invaluable opportunity to examine problems, progress, limitations and innovations in the area of food safety, and to draw up recommendations so that, as a team, we can all

contribute to reaching the goals we have set ourselves. PAHO/WHO, she said, is willing to move forward with the actions you deem necessary.

Report of the Technical Secretariat and the Recommendations put forward at the 3rd COPAIA Meeting:

15. The Chief of Technical Cooperation at INPPAZ, Dr. Enrique Pérez Gutiérrez, gave a report on the technical cooperation activities of INPPAZ and the follow-up of the recommendations put forward at the 3rd COPAIA meeting.

16. He gave an overview of the current context of food safety, PAHO's mission and values and the courses of action approved by COPAIA, their purpose and objectives.

17. He spoke about the level of progress achieved in food safety systems, which are evaluated using an evidence-based analytical methodology that employs variables from five working areas:

- Food Laws and Regulations
- Food Control Management
- Inspection Services
- Monitoring of Food and Epidemiological Data
- Information, Education, Communication, Training

18. He then informed the delegates how all the recommendations of COPAIA 3 and RIMSA 13 were implemented.

19. He concluded by pointing out that PAHO functions as a coordinating center for the experience of the countries, channeling recommendations based on the timely diffusion of relevant information, and on training designed to solve problems related to food safety. PAHO, he said, has worked in conjunction with COPAIA and followed the resolutions adopted at RIMSA meetings, with a view to promoting food safety control programs in the Region. It has also encouraged inter-sectorial coordination throughout the entire food chain.

20. PAHO has established cooperation alliances with other international and sub-regional organizations and has actively encouraged the participation of Member States in Codex Alimentarius meetings.

Panel on Cooperation within a Food Safety System that includes the Health and Agriculture Sectors, Producers and Consumers

21. Mr. Ernesto Perdomo of Venezuela gave a presentation on his country's comprehensive food safety system, during which he noted that, unlike other Latin American countries, Venezuela does not have a tradition of exporting agricultural and livestock products, because the economy depends primarily on the oil industry, so there is a strong trend toward the importation of food, by both the private and public sectors. This, in addition to other political, economic, social and cultural factors, means that food control in Venezuela does not conform to a systematized model as occurs in other countries that are required to meet external quality control standards, standards that more often than not are eventually extended to food products destined for domestic consumption. The Venezuelan food control system has been characterized by the intervention of many organizations with diverse legal frameworks, duties and responsibilities, all acting in an uncoordinated manner.

22. However, the country *does* have a favorable constitutional framework which it can use as a basis for the passing of updated, consistent regulations to support the modernization of food control. Venezuela also has laboratory infrastructure and national food inspection services assigned to the different ministries, which could be strengthened via appropriate management that includes the training of human resources, adequate supplies of material resources and other managerial aspects.

23. Dr. Cristina Tirado, a WHO regional food safety advisor for Europe, gave a presentation on a technical cooperation strategy based on food safety, nutrition and sustainable production.

24. Dr. Francisco Muzio, representing the Health Ministry of Uruguay, related his country's experience with the "Municipal Healthy Food Day," during which school children are invited to learn about the basics of food safety through "open door" experiences.

25. Finally, he proposed that PAHO consider declaring May 20 of each year "Inter-American Healthy Food Day," as a commemorative date to increase public awareness about the issue of food safety in the Region. In Uruguay, this date marks the creation of the first municipal food inspection service for markets in 1897.

Panel on the Strategic Alliance among Non-governmental Organizations and PAHO for Food Safety and Innocuousness in the Region of the Americas

26. The consumers' representative for North America, Carolyn Smith DeWaal, Director of Food Safety at the Center for Science in the Public Interest (SCPI), began by pointing out that, as a consequence of the globalization of world food supplies, food contamination knows no boundaries. Innovations in transportation and refrigeration methods mean that food is now transported rapidly between countries and continents.

And while consumers reap the benefits of being able to purchase fresh foods at accessible prices from all over the world, the risks are higher. Food contamination that originates in one area is quickly spread to other areas and can cause a great number of people in countries far away from each other to become ill. The globalization of world food supplies also increases the risk of intentional contamination.

27. The countries of the Region of the Americas face many food safety problems, due to their changing economic climates, cultural practices and geographical factors. In the United States, diseases transmitted by food cause approximately 76 million cases of illness, 325,000 hospitalizations, and 5,000 deaths a year. In developing countries, reported cases of diseases transmitted by food are too low to determine their occurrence with precision. Nonetheless, 21 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean reported 10,400 outbreaks of disease transmitted by food and water that were responsible for approximately 400,000 cases of illness and 500 deaths between 1993 and 2002, according to information compiled by the Pan American Health Organization/World Health Organization (PAHO/WHO).

28. Some countries have well-developed food safety programs, while others lack the necessary resources to ensure strict enforcement of food regulations. Even in the most developed nations in the Americas, food safety programs face daunting challenges.

29. Consumer organizations have begun to play an increasingly important role in the definition of which foods are acceptable in the context of international trade. International collaboration in the drawing up of guidelines and the evaluation of national food safety programs will help guarantee greater access to innocuous foods on domestic markets, in addition to improving food safety and making it easier to sell foods that reach consumers in other countries.

30. The consumers' representative for the Andean Area, Luis Chavez, spoke about how the consumer movement in Bolivia situates the rights and responsibilities of consumers in the context of a search oriented toward attaining social and economic justice for one and all. The consumer protection directives of the United Nations - promoted by Consumers International- reflect our vision in the sense that consumer rights and protection represent a significant contribution toward securing this objective.

31. Food safety, he said, is a priority issue for the Consumer Education and Defense Service (SEDECO-Bolivia), due to the fact that, in our country, food sovereignty and food safety are affected by several factors, among them, political instability, inequality, ethnic and racial discrimination, corruption, which still persists, and, to a certain extent, dependence on transnational companies. Instead of improving, this situation is becoming steadily worse, leading to an increase in hunger and malnutrition, especially among vulnerable sectors of the population, people living in rural areas and children.

32. He concluded by saying that the right to food is a human right, a universal right that does not just imply access to food, but access to safe, quality food. This right also takes into account aspects that reflect our ecological, political and cultural diversity. Consequently, access to innocuous food is a basic right, and guaranteeing it is a public health concern of vital importance to the progress and development of our peoples, one that should be given priority in State policies, where all actors involved in the food chain have an important role to play. Several sectors have made an effort to guarantee the safety of the foods available to Bolivian consumers on the market, but these efforts are not sufficient. The issue deserves to be given priority on the country's political agenda and merits greater attention from international organizations working in this area. All actors in the food chain need to assume their responsibilities and make a commitment to guaranteeing the quality and safety of the food we consume.

33. The consumers' representative for the Southern Cone, Raquel Sánchez, spoke about the Consumers and Users Association of Uruguay (CUA), which is a member of Consumers International and whose social mission is "to study and solve problems that concern consumers, and to guide, assess and protect them with regard to their rights and obligations." One of the objectives of CUA is to: "diffuse and encourage the promotion of the rights and obligations of the consumer in the area of food," which means that this aspect of its work is related to the areas of food safety, the innocuousness of food, the environment and biotechnology.

34. Food-borne diseases are on the increase in the Region, due to a rising population, tourism, intensive urbanization, aggressive international trade in food and regional socio-economic crises, which have given rise to more vulnerable groups and new forms of chemical and microbiological contamination.

35. Food is a basic human right that requires the appropriate legal instruments to guarantee its effective enforcement. There can be no doubt that food safety is a central issue for public health authorities worldwide, but as consumer associations, we also have an important role to play in this challenge.

36. As a consumer association, we seek to shape "responsible consumers," who will act as agents of change in the food safety issue, who will demand the use of good practices in the handling, production and sale of food, who are aware of the relationship between food, nutrition and health and who can play an active role in forming healthy eating habits. Improving the safety and quality of the food we consume requires political will, investment and commitment on the part of all those involved in the food chain, not just public institutions, but productive, industrial and commercial sectors and the community at large. In view of the progress in trade and communications and the tight-knit relationship between these on a regional and international level, it is difficult for us

to make headway on issues of common interest to the Region on our own, which is why we feel it is necessary to create national food safety commissions comprised of state entities, inter-governmental agencies, the private sector and civil society, so that we can identify weak points in the system, propose solutions and work as a network in the countries of the Region.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Considering that:

37. The safety and innocuousness of food are fundamental to ensuring the quality of life of the population, pursuant to the basic principles consecrated in the Declaration on Human Rights, and that both contribute to meeting the millennium development goals, particularly as regards reducing hunger and poverty, reducing the impact of infant morbidity and mortality, and in the area of sustainable development;

38. An inter-sectorial approach to food safety control programs contributes to health, tourism and the trading of food products;

COPAIA 4 agrees:

1. To approve the report of the Technical Secretariat for the 2003-2004 period.
2. That the Member States should continue to show will and political decision in the mobilization and coordination of resources on a national, regional and global level, with a view to progressing toward the common objective of reducing the health, social and economic repercussions associated with diseases transmitted by contaminated food products.
3. To call on PAHO/WHO to continue rendering technical cooperation in the area of food safety, in conjunction with the public and private sectors of the countries, agencies providing international cooperation, multilateral and bilateral agencies.
4. To acknowledge:
 - a. The benefits of a food safety approach that takes in all aspects of the food chain, from the “ground to the table.”
 - b. The use of evidence-based analysis to determine which measures throughout the food chain are effective at producing innocuous food.
 - c. The importance to food production of enforcing animal health regulations.

- d. A high level of awareness about the impact the lack of innocuous foods has on human health.
 - e. Active and growing participation by consumer and producer organizations in the development of a national food safety policy.
 - f. That there have been reports of inadequate risk control on a producer level and in other links in the food chain in several Member States of COPAIA.
 - g. The implementation of a comprehensive food safety system coordinated by PAHO with openness and transparency.
 - h. The need for each government to prioritize food safety as a State policy
 - i. The need for multidisciplinary, inter-sectorial and inter-institutional work.
 - j. The shared responsibility of governments, productive sectors and consumers in the food safety programs of the countries, with leadership coming from the public sector.
5. To encourage the countries of the Region of the Americas to follow the example of Uruguay and establish a “Healthy Food Day.”
 6. To propose that the issue of food safety be considered for the World Health Day at the next World Health Assembly.
 7. To establish, under the leadership of PAHO, a self-evaluation system for food safety programs that allows each individual country to check that these programs are effective in practice and that they produce the results sought after, i.e. that they improve the quality of life of our peoples.
 8. To make greater use of laboratories as a tool in sub-programs for the monitoring of food-borne diseases and food contaminants.
 9. That food safety is a basic function of public health authorities seeking to improve the standard of living of their populations and increase the export potential of food products, thus putting paid to the false dichotomy of health-trade.
 10. To underline the importance of continuing to strengthen food safety programs on a local level through municipal-based health and productive initiatives.
 11. To encourage the countries of the Region to share their experiences in the various areas of food safety, as defined by PAHO.

12. To thank the Mexican authorities for their hospitality and for providing the facilities to hold this meeting.

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