



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
ORGANIZATION
OF THE UNITED NATIONS



Agenda Item 7

AC 05/5

FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for the Americas and the Caribbean

San José, Costa Rica, 6-9 December 2005

INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL COOPERATION IN FOOD SAFETY

(Prepared by FAO; PAHO/WHO¹; IICA; OIRSA)

Introduction

Food safety is an essential public health and economic issue for all countries. Microbiological and chemical contamination in food is a major cause of illnesses. Food-borne disease remains a real and formidable problem in both developed and developing countries, causing great human suffering and significant economic losses.

In addition to improving public health, effective food safety systems are also vital to maintain consumer confidence in the food system and to provide a sound regulatory foundation for domestic and international trade in food, which supports economic development. New international trade agreements developed under the World Trade Organization (WTO) have emphasized the need for regulations governing international trade in foods to be based on scientific principles. The Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS) permits countries to take legitimate measures to protect the life and health of consumers, animals and plants provided such measures can be justified scientifically and do not unnecessarily impede trade.

Traditional food safety systems are inadequate to cope with the complex, persistent pervasive and evolving array of food safety issues existing today. In order to effectively cope with, and respond to, the wide range of food safety challenges presently confronting countries, modern national food control systems² need to be based on 1) science, 2) a preventative approach, 3) risk analysis³, 4) a food chain approach⁴, and 5) involvement of all stakeholders.

It is therefore imperative that governments, the private/public sectors, consumers and other stakeholders work in a concerted manner in this shared responsibility of assuring food safety from farm-to-fork. Cooperation at the national, sub-regional, regional and international levels provides opportunities for synergy and maximized benefits for improved human health and economic development.

¹ Note that the names of UN agencies are always listed alphabetically, as reflected throughout this document.

² FAO and WHO have developed guidelines for implementing national food control systems, which outlines the elements of an effective, modern food control system. The guidelines are available from: www.fao.org/es/ESN/food/control_FCS_en.stm

³ More information on the implementation of risk analysis in modern food control systems is available in the FAO/WHO Food Safety Risk Analysis manual, which has been peer reviewed and will be published in early 2006.

⁴ A document (in English and Spanish) outlining FAO's proposed food chain approach is available as CRD 26.

Role of FAO and WHO in assuring food safety

In response to these concerns, the 53rd World Health Assembly, through Resolution WHA 53.15, requested WHO Director-General the establishment of a global strategy for the surveillance of food-borne diseases and the reinforcement of technical cooperation in member countries regarding food safety and health. In response to this, WHO currently includes food safety among its main ten health priorities; consequently, the food safety programme became the Food Safety Department.

The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO), as the Regional Office of WHO for the Americas, is a catalyzer for assuring that all the people of the Americas enjoy ideal health as well as for contributing to the population well-being. In the area of food safety, it develops a technical cooperation strategic plan focussed on the countries, which has been submitted and approved by inter-ministry meetings on health and agriculture as well as by PAHO Directive Council. PAHO is the only region of WHO which counts with a technical group specialized in food safety that has been working with member countries to build a new vision and actions for improving food safety, based on a change of traditional inspection services towards a systematic approach of the entire food chain.

This strategy considers the orientations of the policy given by the Pan American Commission for Food Safety– COPAIA.

In response to recommendations from its governing bodies, such as Recommendation #47 of the 27th FAO Regional Conference for Latin America and the Caribbean to *Develop technical capacities to address the safety and sanitary requirements of the food trade*, and the demonstrated needs of the region, FAO has been undertaking a number of activities, including the implementation of field projects, workshops and training courses and the development of useful tools to assist in the development of effective food control systems. These activities are often conducted jointly with WHO or other relevant organizations.

FAO is the UN agency with a mandate to raise levels of nutrition, improve agricultural productivity, better the lives of rural populations and contribute to the growth of the world economy. Governments are increasingly realizing the importance of reducing the potential for food contamination at the source, which is often at the farm or fishery level. Accordingly, as the production of plant and animal products, as well as food processing and distribution issues are within FAO's mandate, FAO is well-placed to assist countries in implementing a food chain approach to food safety.

In order to achieve this, FAO has developed its strategy for ensuring safe and nutritious food based on an interdisciplinary approach to provide normative, policy and technical advice for implementing prevailing international norms through a mixture of regulatory and non-regulatory interventions, as appropriate, at the most outcome-effective points in the food chain. The implementation of these international norms allows countries to comply with the obligations of the SPS and WTO Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Agreements and also ensure national public health. The strategy addresses both formal and informal food chains and allows countries to implement elements of the strategy on a step-by-step basis according to their needs and their capacities. Implementation of the strategy therefore includes enhanced technical assistance and capacity building activities, policy advice to mitigate increased costs, and improved investment by both public and private institutions at appropriate stages in the food chain. It assigns a major role to communication and extension services in its implementation and it also foresees enhanced cooperation with other international agencies working in the same or related fields.

FACTORS WHICH LEAD TOWARDS A NEW APPROACH OF NATIONAL PROGRAMMES FOR FOOD CONTROL

Food safety requires the risk analysis from production to consumption

Traditional programmes for food control are focussed on the control of the end product. For example, inspection programmes in meat plants or inspection of food transforming establishments. Currently, for competition purposes, supplies such as food additives, micro-nutrients, pesticides, and veterinary drugs, are inadequately used and they should be controlled throughout the food chain to guarantee their safe use. The last ten years have showed that traditional actions, based on well-defined problems, are not always sufficient to face new challenges. Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) and the appearance of contaminants such as dioxin, are examples where the problem started with supplies, but the most important consequences became evident along the food chain.

As previously stated, modern food control systems must be based on risk analysis and address issues across the entire food chain. The FAO/WHO Food Safety Risk Analysis Manual further outlines the application risk analysis as a preventative and science-based approach to ensuring safe food.

Improving the risk analysis capacity

Where public health goals are not being met, the risk analysis allows evaluating options and suggesting modifications in the execution of food control systems. Today, conflict resolution based on science establishes risk analysis as the reference for decision making and highlights the importance of communicating the risk level to all stakeholders. Likewise, risk evaluation should consider an inter-disciplinary team. On the other hand, sharing information among governmental agencies, academic institutions and the private sector may result in more solid competitive advantages.

Although traditional approaches (improvement of inspection and analysis systems) have proved to be quite satisfactory, the risk analysis considers susceptibility of populations in combination with low levels of exposure to potential chemical and microbiological hazards. However, further data on food consumption and concentrations of contaminants in food are necessary, particularly in poorer countries, in order to evaluate, manage and communicate those risks, including the establishment of national and international norms. Therefore, interaction with organisms dealing with food and nutritional safety are very important, as well as interactions regarding risk evaluation and management. On the other hand, diagnostic quality is crucial. Hence, FAO and PAHO have identified and linked food laboratories through the Inter American Network of Food Analysis Laboratories (INFAL). Likewise, clinical laboratories have organized themselves through PULSENET Latin America and WHO Global Programme on Salmonella Surveillance (WHO-Global Salm Surv).

As previously stated, FAO, in collaboration with WHO, has developed risk analysis manuals on food safety and in Biosecurity. Training courses and workshops have been implemented based on these manuals and more are planned for the future⁵.

⁵ More information on all FAO capacity building activities in foods safety is available from: http://www.fao.org/es/ESN/food/meetings_workshops_en.stm.

Modern programmes for food control are based on articulation of public and private sectors

The vertical normative approach was the cornerstone of traditional food safety programmes. The private sector was passive, a recipient of negative and positive results from State actions. Expansion towards the entire food chain involved a redefinition of the role of the State and the private sector. The State now includes the ministries of agriculture, health, commerce, tourism and others. Some of its partners are universities and research institutes for evaluation of new technologies and trends. The private sector, as the owner of products and processes, is the most active and has the responsibility of joining to define, support and sustain food safety policies and programmes.

Assuring food safety along the entire food chain requires partnerships and education at all levels. Training is an essential element of the implementation of quality assurance systems and good practices, such as HACCP, GMPs and GHPs, and all other activities involved in producing safe food. In order to improve food safety, all those employed in food production must be thoroughly trained in their responsibilities. In particular, the management should be conscious of the risks associated with the food business and must take adequate steps to mitigate such risks. The application of Good Hygienic Practices using the Codex Code of Principles of Food Hygiene as well as other Codex specific guidelines for certain foods must be applied.

Public health and food safety

During the last two decades, public health authorities of the countries of the Americas have faced a substantial increase in the number of food-borne diseases. Besides, the task of estimating the occurrence of FBD with a certain degree of accuracy is really difficult since, in many countries, epidemiological surveillance systems are inadequate, occurrence is not properly recorded and only a small number of cases are reported to health services and research is performed on even a smaller number, mainly due to the limited resources of food safety and food inspection management systems.

The responsibility of supplying safe food is shared, from food suppliers to consumers, thus defining a new scope of action for food safety. Biological contaminants such as bacteria, viruses, parasites, fungi and protozoa may be transmitted to food during production or harvesting activities by means of contaminated water, inadequate use of fertilizers, bad hygiene practices, or inadequate food handling during preparation or transportation. Chemical contaminants may contaminate food along the entire food chain and include mycotoxins, dioxins, PCBs, pesticide residues, antibiotic residues, among others, which may lead to the development of antibiotic resistance, veterinary drug residues and heavy metals.

Food Safety: A wider vision

The globalization of food trade poses a transnational challenge to authorities responsible for food safety, since contaminated food from one country may cause an outbreak of disease in another. Agriculture and food industries are in the process of integration and consolidation. This consolidation, together with a growing world trade, implies that large quantities of food coming from the same source are now distributed to much distant places than before, thus creating the possibility of wider and more spread out FBD outbreaks.

In order to reply to the increasing demands for safe food and their international trade, food safety programmes should reflect an extended mandate and a wider vision. Food safety services will no longer be based on the traditional organization of human health within the Ministries of Health. A fundamental condition for national and regional initiatives regarding food safety is to recognize that it is an intersectoral

issue which covers the areas of public health, agriculture, fishery, commerce, education, environment and other sectors and that cooperation between those sectors is essential. Measures should be taken to guarantee public health, trade and competitiveness should be increased, food security and tourism should be promoted, and participation, continuity and commitment regarding environmental issues should be strengthened. In order to achieve these objectives, food safety programmes should include the entire agro-food chain, from inputs for production to consumption of the end product.

ACTIONS FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF FOOD SAFETY TECHNICAL COOPERATION PROGRAMMES

FAO and WHO have historically worked towards improving food safety along the entire food chain. A report on their activities in capacity building and in the provision of scientific advice was presented as Agenda items 3 and 4 during the 14th Session of the Codex Coordinating Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean in December 2004⁶. Capacity building and the provision of technical assistance have been achieved through collaboration between international organizations, national governments, international and regional financial institutions and NGOs. Activities conducted include the following: 1) the evaluation of institutional structures, legislation/regulations, inspection and laboratory services, infrastructure and human resources and management systems, all for food control; and 2) formulation of recommendations for improvement and training of food control officers, food control managers, food inspectors and food analysts through seminars, workshops and study tours. FAO and WHO also prepare joint training manuals and guidelines such as the Guidelines for Strengthening National Food Control Systems (previously mentioned), Food Safety Risk Analysis Manual, Codex training package, HACCP for Small and Less Developed Businesses, etc.; provide support for the establishment and strengthening of National Codex Committees; and provide policy advice and assistance in the development of regulatory frameworks. FAO/WHO have also been working together to provide technical assistance to member states in the preparation of applications to the Codex Trust Fund.

FAO and WHO work to complement each other in order to ensure effective utilization of resources. They successfully organized the two Global Fora for Food Safety Regulators in Marrakech, Morocco in 2002 and Bangkok, Thailand in 2004. Many other joint activities have been implemented as described in CAC/28 INF.5. This Regional Conference on Food Safety for the Americas and the Caribbean is another collaborative effort between the two sister organizations.

Other joint regional activities include the following: support to the FAO/WHO Coordinating Committee for Latin America and the Caribbean (CCLAC); FAO/PAHO pre-CCLAC workshops on national involvement in Codex, national food control systems and implementation of risk analysis; and cooperation in the Inter-American Network of Food Analysis Laboratories (INFAL)/Red Interamericana de Laboratorios de Análisis de Alimentos (RILAA), OIRSA, IICA and other relevant agencies are invited to attend the workshops and other activities.

In developing countries, the limited financial resources are frequently directed towards the sectors which according to the governments represent the country's more urgent priorities, such as other health problems, education, housing, sanitation, food acquisition and defense. Issues relating to food safety are not really appreciated and they are generally a low priority within public health programmes since FBDs are considered mild diseases with spontaneous remission. The fact that they have serious consequences on health as well as on trade and economy is often neglected.

⁶ An update of FAO's capacity building activities in the region is available as CRD 32.

The lack of adequacy of food safety services to the present environment and to new challenges is affecting the ability of countries to face the impact on public health, take advantage of opportunities of emerging markets, meet international sanitary and phytosanitary standards, and comply with international demands and agreements. This was more evident in developing countries, which, in spite of having received and allotted resources to better national systems, have not always met the desired goals.

In 2001, the Inter American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA) estimated the effectiveness of national services in the Americas to comply with or benefit from the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) Agreement was less than 40% on average; likewise, estimate institutional sustainability was around 20% on average⁷.

Similarly, in 2003 PAHO made an evaluation using the document FAO/WHO "Assuring Safety and Quality: Guidelines for Strengthening National Food Control Systems", a FAO/WHO joint publication, as reference frame. The study highlights that 18 countries have a level of development in their food safety systems ranging from 25% to 60%, with a global average of 44% and 48%, respectively. It should be noticed that such countries do not even reach an average of 50% in the conditions of the proposed system. Twelve countries have a global average of development level ranging from 58% to 81%. The study is posted on (<http://www.panalimentos.org/evaluacion/evaluacion.sia.espaniol/index.html>).

In 2002 and 2003, FAO's Food Quality and Standards Service developed, administered, and compiled questionnaires for capacity building in food safety from 99 participants at five pre-Codex workshops, representing at least 48 countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America, the Southwest Pacific, and the Near East. Most of the respondents work in government and have access to the Internet at work. Workshops and seminars were indicated as the most effective food safety training activities (91% of respondents) and Quality Assurance Systems/HACCP/ GHP/ GAP was the area of food safety that respondents most often listed as requiring strengthening in their country. Specific subjects requiring strengthening within each prioritization area were also recorded. The complete results of the survey are available from the FAO website at: ftp://ftp.fao.org/es/esn/food/CB_questionnaire.pdf. These evaluations provide complementary data to enable improved technical cooperation in food safety and quality.

This is partly explained by the low investment of national governments, that normally allot 5% of their national budget to agriculture and, from this amount, only 5 to 10% is allotted to agricultural health⁸. Regarding external funding, generally coming from loans, they are difficult to estimate, but they range between 0,2% and 2% of the total amount these organisms lend for agriculture⁹.

Therefore, the main tools for the countries to promote modernization of national services are technical assistance and investment projects. Traditionally, investment projects have concentrated on infrastructure such as the establishment of quarantine posts and creation of diagnostic labs, and equipment acquisition.

⁷ Inter American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (2002) "*Los roles múltiples de la Sanidad Agropecuaria*" ("Multiple Roles of Agricultural Health")

⁸ Pomareda, C. (2001) Proposal of Hemispheric Programme for Agricultural Health and Food Safety, submitted by IICA for consideration of International Organisms for Development Funding, Bilateral Cooperation Agencies. San José-Costa Rica.

⁹ Based on on-line information available at the World Bank and the Inter American Bank for Development website, for the period 1961 to July 2005.

Discussions on the issue of technical cooperation have emerged in different international fora. On the one hand, developed countries have showed concern for the reduced impact that the technical cooperation offered by them and by cooperation agencies has had in developing and less developed countries. On the other hand, and in spite of the important number of resources and actions assigned to date, developing countries continue claiming higher cooperation and the adequate implementation of the concept of technical cooperation.

In order to provide sustainability and guarantee the success of initiatives carried out to improve the capacities inherent to services, they should be based on identification, analysis and prioritization of needs. Hence, it could be very useful for countries to count with an instrument to characterize the performance of institutional and functional capacities of services, in order to continuously monitor improvement and define strategic actions in technical cooperation. There are initiatives such as the so-called Performance, Vision and Strategy (PVS) instrument for veterinary services¹⁰ between IICA and the OIE. Besides, IICA and the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO/WHO) elaborated the PVS for food safety national services and, in a similar fashion it was elaborated for national phytosanitary protection organisms.

FAO has developed a manual on *Guidelines to Assess Capacity Building Needs in Official Food Control Systems*, as a tool to assist national governments to identify their most pressing needs in the area of food control. The manual is currently undergoing pilot testing and will be widely distributed in English, French and Spanish. FAO has also developed a Biosecurity needs assessment tool, which allows countries to evaluate their needs for implementing a holistic approach to food safety, animal and plant health. A Biosecurity Risk Analysis manual has also been developed to assist countries in utilizing risk analysis across these three sectors. Both of these Biosecurity tools have been peer reviewed and will be pilot tested and published as a complete package in early 2006¹¹.

As part of its Technical Cooperation Project (TCP) programme, FAO has implemented a number of national projects to assist the countries of the region in improving various aspects of their food control system. In addition, a number of regional projects to strengthen the national Codex committees in the region have been implemented, including Codex training courses in each of the countries of the region. FAO, at times jointly with WHO, has also conducted numerous workshops on food control systems, risk analysis, and other aspects of food safety. Through these workshops and field projects, FAO has assisted countries to conduct a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis of their food control situation, resulting in a concrete, practical vision of their regional and national needs in food safety¹².

In this way, a set of harmonized tools is available, which helps the countries to establish the current level of performance, reach a shared vision between the public and the private sectors, establish priorities and facilitate strategic planning.

Recently, OIRSA and the member countries have elaborated a harmonized regional strategic plan and national strategic plans for the application of sanitary and phytosanitary measures corresponding to the 2006-2010 period, which integrate the actions and the economic resources necessary for the harmonization of agrosanitary and food safety measures. The execution of plans implies the participation of productive sectors related to different activities, as well as of other entities of the public and academic sector.

¹⁰ Electronic versions of the instrument in English and Spanish available at OIE (www.oie.int) and IICA (infoagro.net/salud) websites

¹¹ More information on FAO's work in the area of Biosecurity is available from www.fao.org/biosecurity/

¹² More information on all these activities can be found on the FAO website at:
http://www.fao.org/es/ESN/food/capacity_en.stm

The participation of international cooperation in this issue involves facilitating the process of modernization and updating of national services in the countries and the region through different actions. Beginning by providing the countries with a guide of fundamental competencies the services should contemplate. Promoting the training of leaders who could generate and sustain this process of continuous improvement and adaptation to the new environment. Showing the complementary nature of the different technical areas and supporting their process of continuous knowledge. Supporting the countries in learning about and taking advantage of the SPS Agreement and helping them to recognize that the economic factor is not a limiting factor. In turn, the countries should seek the sustainability of their services and the actions they carry out to reinforce them, by means of public-private alliances.

Strengthening the epidemiological surveillance of food-borne diseases

FBD epidemiological surveillance is a key component of any system of food safety which provides fundamental information on the kind of food involved in outbreaks, human groups at risk, practices leading to contamination, development and survival of causative agents in food, and places where food is often inadequately handled. This data is essential for the design of effective management programmes; it also allows monitoring changes in FBD epidemiology and identification of new pathogens, food patterns and habits, which may represent a risk for public health. An epidemiological surveillance programme should provide the necessary information to validate the efficacy of national food controls and the rapid response to FBD outbreaks.

Epidemiological surveillance is the base to formulate national strategies for the reduction of risks related to contaminated food consumption. Early detection of recent problems posed by food, detailed and precise knowledge of the nature and the level of food-borne diseases is a previous condition for the adoption of measures aimed at lowering such levels. Therefore, the current shortage of reliable data on FBDs in most countries is the major obstacle to carry out preventative interventions based on information.

An epidemiological surveillance system integrating epidemiology and inspection services and FBD surveillance laboratories at local level will allow to associate FBDs with consumption of contaminated food. This line of action is adequately framed within the development of the concept of public health surveillance, where all international organization may interact. For example, FAO, IICA, OIRSA with their actions at the level of primary production and strengthening of food safety systems of the countries, interact with PAHO experience to strengthen epidemiological surveillance systems.

Improving the capacity for effectively managing risks with the use of preventative approaches

In food safety, inequities are dramatically marked between developed countries which have expanded their capacity to protect the population from exposure to microorganisms and chemical substances in food, and developing countries which have many priorities competing in their health agendas, and where food safety is not recognized as a crucial issue for the health of their population, especially because consumers do not see the importance of the availability of safe food. In developing countries, the consumption of artisanal food is common, there is less availability of processed food, large volumes of fresh food are commercialized in traditional markets, and food consumed outside the household is typically prepared by street-vendors. Most concerns about food safety are related to inadequate use of agricultural chemical substances, inadequate storage, lack of food inspection, absence of infrastructure such as running water and adequate refrigeration and lack of awareness regarding food safety and hygiene. The technical cooperation agenda of all the organisms working on this issue interacts promoting consumers education (WHO programme of the five keys for food safety), building capacities in the areas of good hygiene

practices and hazard analysis and critical control points (FAO; PAHO, OIRSA and IICA training programmes).

Food safety in the regulatory framework of the countries

The Codex Alimentarius Commission, a joint FAO/WHO body whose secretariat is headquartered at FAO in Rome, works to establish international food standards and related texts¹³. The aim of the Codex Alimentarius Commission is to protect the health of consumers and to ensure fair practices in the food trade. The WTO SPS Agreement, which seeks to enable countries to protect human, animal or plant life or health in their country while ensuring that such standards do not act as an unjustified trade barrier, recognizes Codex standards as benchmarks for international trade. The WTO Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) Agreement, which works to ensure that regulations, standards, testing and certification procedures for all products do not create unnecessary obstacles to trade, also refers to the use of international standards. Participation by individual countries in the work of Codex had proved difficult due to cost and capacity constraints. This greater acceptance of Codex standards, as well as the establishment of the FAO/WHO Codex Trust for Enhanced Participation in Codex, has increased the interest of countries in the activities of the Codex Alimentarius Commission. Preparation and presentation of country positions on issues often require a great deal of effort so WHO and FAO have developed a training package on the work and procedures of Codex to assist member states. Countries in the region do not only need to be physically present in Codex meetings, but they also need assistance to provide relevant data to the Codex system and to take an active part in the standard setting process. Strengthening of regional capacity building efforts in order to foster regional cohesiveness that will allow all countries of the region to have a common and more effective voice is paramount. In view of the fact that national standards are often dictated by trading partners whose standards may be too stringent, member states could consider the application of regional standards for levels of contaminants in foods.

FAO and WHO also work together through expert bodies such as the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives and Contaminants (JECFA), the Joint FAO/WHO Meeting on Pesticide Residues (JMPR), the Joint Expert Meetings on Microbiological Risk Assessment (JEMRA) to provide scientific advice to Codex member countries.

AO has implemented technical cooperation projects in all countries in the South and Central American region, as well as workshops to assist countries in improving their understanding of and participation in Codex.

FAO, WHO-PAHO, IICA and OIRSA work by strengthening the participation of the countries in the elaboration of norms, guidelines and recommendations of the *Codex Alimentarius* Commission, supporting the active participation of the countries in the task of the Commission and its subsidiary organs. The Codex has elaborated many international norms on food safety, and generally the countries have used them in their national legislation. The elaboration of international norms based on health and their adoption by some countries will improve food safety both at the domestic market and at global level. In many countries, effective food control is hindered by the existence of a fragmented legislation, multiple jurisdictions and weak supervision and application. The existence of national control systems and food regulation is essential to guarantee the health of the population of the country. FAO and PAHO support the Coordinating Committee of the *Codex Alimentarius* for Latin American and the Caribbean (CCLAC) with the organization of technical workshops and supporting the development of strategies to encourage the

¹³ All Codex texts, meeting agendas and reports, and other information on Codex is available from the Codex website at: www.codexalimentarius.net

countries of the Region for actively participating in the work of the *Codex Alimentarius*. Within the wide frame of food safety, PAHO has created the Regional Information System of Food Legislation – LEGALIM, in order to provide the countries of the region with a system whose database allows saving and processing full texts of their food legislation, updated and in force. IICA has created a database of official organisms which certify food exports by country, according to their source and degree of food processing; this information is available via the informative bulletin AGROSALUD¹⁴.

FAO has developed the International Portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health (www.ipfsaph.org) in cooperation with Codex, IPPC, OIE, WHO and WTO to provide easy access to international standards and other official information from partner international agencies. The Portal also provides a view on national legislation and related texts from the EU, USA, and smaller data sets from a pilot group of developing countries (24,000 records in November 2005). The latest version includes up-to-date information on the Codex-established maximum residue limits (MRLs) for veterinary drugs and pesticides, as well as the JECFA and JMPR evaluations of these substances; navigation in English, French and Spanish; and a "help desk" for questions users may have regarding the portal.

A regional portal for the Latin America and the Caribbean region is also under development. The "Portal Regional de Inocuidad y Sanidad Agroalimentaria (PRISA)" will exclusively focus on food safety and animal and plant health concerns of the region. It will include national information on standards, regulations and legislation, notifications, organizations and contact points, as well as relevant news and events from across the region. The prototype version of the system will be launched at the end of the first quarter 2006, and the site will be available in English, Portuguese and Spanish.

Consumer Education

An especially important role of the food industry in assuring food safety is communication with consumers. The industry widely uses integrated communication including advertising, marketing and product promotion. Product labelling is another means of communication that allows the consumer to make informed decisions on products. Labels must therefore avoid making false and misleading health claims. Advertising and labelling must not only be used as one-way communication systems but must allow informed consumer feed-back to food producers and distributors.

The governments, the industry and the academic sector will share the responsibility of conceiving and applying risk analysis systems that make emphasis on risk communication. Consumers should not be passive and it is necessary to encourage them to more deeply study the questions of food safety, as governments and educational institutions usually do. This is particularly true if the new problems are related to hygiene practices adopted at households or to other measures that may have an important function in FBD prevention.

In this regard, it is essential to promote the participation of the community so that it feels identified with the problem and incorporates desirable behaviors that contribute to food safety to its health culture. Therefore, it has been suggested that technical cooperation in social communication and education should be based on structuring of models, where the five keys for food safety proposed by WHO is a key element both for the establishment of campaigns and for educational materials; from there, a joint work of the agencies to be implemented at the level of the countries should be developed. Establishing work relationships allows the development of communication pieces with educational messages promoting adequate food handling.

¹⁴

infoagro.net/salud

Consumer groups are invited to participate in Codex activities, all relevant food safety workshops, electronic discussion forum, etc. In June 2005, FAO/WHO facilitated a meeting of consumer non-governmental organizations at which the Guidelines for Consumer Organizations to Promote National Food Safety Systems was developed. Representatives of consumer groups are invited to participate, as appropriate, in expert and technical consultations related to food safety.

CONCLUSIONS

It is imperative to strengthen the technical cooperation articulated in the field of food safety so that every country in the Region, and in other Regions, could be supported for the generation of national capacities according to the abovementioned demands.

At the same time, international organisms should act as linking and consultation centers based on promotion of updated and relevant information and effective training, for the resolution of problems. They should finally be able to facilitate bilateral and multilateral cooperation to make possible agreements, joint projects, and missions, viable through mobilization of trained human resources of the countries and, only when necessary, experts in specific areas. All this aligned with the optimization of the use of resources according to the cost/benefit analysis.

FAO, WHO-PAHO, IICA and OIRSA should support the member countries to avoid superposition and duplications and promote the implementation of national systems for food safety with a comprehensive approach including every food along the entire food chain.

Assuring food safety is a shared responsibility between all stakeholders, especially civil society, consumers and industry, that must have a common vision in order to succeed. In the Americas and the Caribbean, guaranteeing food safety involves activities conducted by several agencies and institutions whose mandates are often not clearly defined. This has resulted in fragmentation of the food control system and inefficient use of resources. Cooperation and coordination at national, subregional, regional and international levels is required to improve effectiveness and thus protection of the health of the consumer and opportunities for trade.