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TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE TO DEVELOPING COUNTRIES: EXPERIENCES AND LESSONS LEARNED

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SUMMARY

The United States supports food safety technical cooperation and assistance to developing countries, directly or coordinated with relevant international organizations, to enhance the safety of foods available to all consumers and to contribute to economic development by strengthening sustainable production systems and export markets. Technical cooperation activities that have been undertaken by the United States include technical training, programs and consultations in such areas as national regulatory and enforcement frameworks, and consumer education.

Lessons learned include:

- 1) Consideration should be given to how desired outcomes can be sustained;
- 2) Criteria should be developed to ensure resources are used appropriately and effectively;
- 3) Food safety education strategies should be multi-layered and prioritized; and
- 4) Strengthening food safety systems requires self-assessment, the involvement of donor organizations, and improved coordination of technical assistance activities.

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INTRODUCTION

The United States supports food safety technical cooperation and assistance to developing countries, directly or coordinated with relevant international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Trade Organization Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (WTO SPS). This paper discusses the US approach, provides examples, and explores lessons learned. Finally, the paper identifies US government agencies involved in technical assistance activities and provides the Internet location for a compendium of these activities.

US APPROACH TO TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE/COOPERATION

US food safety technical assistance and cooperation activities enhance the safety of foods available to all consumers and contribute to economic development by strengthening sustainable production systems and export markets. These activities reflect a “farm to table” approach. They are based on the principle that assurance of global food safety requires coordinated efforts and the cooperation of food producers, processors, handlers, regulatory systems, domestic and international health and agricultural organizations, and consumers. Consequently, the US approach involves many sectors: technical, policy, public, media, and private. The activities include technical training, programs, consultations, and consumer education. In addition, US government agencies work with donor organizations to conduct comprehensive food safety diagnosis and priority setting activities.

The US Food and Drug Administration, the Food Safety and Inspection Service of the US Department of Agriculture, and the Environmental Protection Agency are the agencies with primary responsibility for food safety. In addition, several other agencies fund and/or administer technical assistance to developing countries. These government agencies often collaborate to improve efficiency in the use of staff and budget resources.

Food and Drug Administration (FDA), US Department of Health and Human Services: FDA regulates all foods produced in or imported into the United States, except for meat, poultry and processed eggs. FDA staff have participated in country and region-specific activities to deliver technical (scientific, administrative, legal, enforcement, etc.) information, using available resources. These activities often involve emerging issues of direct interest and importance to FDA. Its involvement has enabled the agency to contribute to resolution of public health issues and influence procedures and policy pertaining to FDA-regulated foods. In addition, the FDA has a proactive food safety program that seeks to develop collaborative activities with other nations.

Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS), US Department of Agriculture (USDA): FSIS regulate meat, poultry, and egg products and administers the US meat, poultry, and egg products inspection programs. It annually conducts an Inspection Seminar for Foreign Government Officials, which provides an overview of the US meat and poultry inspection program, livestock production system, and HACCP. In addition, FSIS provides technical experts to deliver training and seminars, sponsors participants from developing countries to attend workshops and seminars that enhance their knowledge on technical and regulatory issues and provides technical briefings to government officials who visit USDA headquarters in Washington.

US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA): EPA technical cooperation with developing countries is aimed at advancing sound pesticide management worldwide through both bilateral and multilateral efforts. Specifically, technical assistance and cooperation activities are aimed at promoting better understanding of US requirements governing pesticide residues in food and assisting developing countries in their efforts to build regulatory and information-sharing capacity. In turn, this should aid the countries in adjusting to sanitary and phytosanitary requirements applicable to their exports and in complying with their obligations under the WTO SPS Agreement.

Other US Agencies:

- US Agency for International Development (USAID)

- Foreign Agricultural Service (FAS/USDA)
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Department of Health and Human Services)
- Grain Inspection, Packers and Stockyards Administration (GIPSA/USDA)
- Agricultural Research Service (ARS/USDA)
- US Department of Commerce
- US Department of Defense
- (Technical assistance is part of the central mission for both USAID and FAS)

US technical assistance programs address a wide range of food safety issues. These issues include regulatory and legislative reform, cold chain integrity, physical and chemical contaminants, low acid canned foods, mycotoxins, fresh fruits and vegetables, juices, and seafood, meat and poultry safety. The examples discussed below primarily relate to microbial food safety. Expertise for specific projects is provided by US food safety agencies and/or through contracts with non-governmental organizations and industry. Examples of US-provided food safety technical assistance are:

FOOD SAFETY OUTREACH MEETINGS

Since 1999, the United States has held a series of five regional meetings on food safety. The meetings highlight US food safety programs and policies, efforts to enhance food safety in the region (including WTO-SPS implementation planning), donor organization activities, and WHO/FAO efforts. The meetings provide fora to discuss how to improve food safety and human foodborne disease surveillance, as well as the inter-relationship of food safety and trade initiatives. Overall, the meetings amplify and encourage communication and coordination of food safety activities in the region. The goal is to increase the knowledge and technical/administrative capacity of nations to address food safety challenges.

TRAINING ON GOOD AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES AND PRODUCE SAFETY

In 1998, the US Food and Drug Administration published the “Guide to Minimize Microbial Contamination of Fresh Fruits and Vegetables” and began a program of outreach, education and training both domestically and internationally. Each program is based on the premise that participants will carry out additional training programs in their respective countries. Examples include:

- Through the US-Mexico Collaborative Exchange on Food Safety¹, the United States participated in a series of Mexican federal and state training programs on good agricultural practices in Mexico. The United States also provided consultations on farm investigations related to microbial contamination.
- US federal agencies developed a program for food safety leaders from seven Central American countries that consisted of examination of fresh produce production in the United States and best practices in Guatemala.
- “The Sampling and Laboratory Analysis for Microbial Pathogens on Fresh Produce Training Program” was developed under the US – Chile Collaborative Exchange on Food Safety. The program objective was to enhance the safety of fresh produce exports by increasing Chile's capacity to detect microbial pathogens. Activities included:
 1. exchange of information on equipment, supplies, laboratory methods, procedures, and practices, to determine differences and similarities in practices so that the core curriculum could be developed
 2. laboratory training and consultation on detection methods for *Listeria*, *Salmonella*, *Cyclospora*, and *E. coli* O157:H7

¹ A Collaborative Exchange is a forum for developing joint, mutually beneficial programs on food safety. The US has two Collaborative Exchanges (Mexico and Chile) and is in the process of establishing such an exchange with Canada.

3. training on key sampling procedures
 4. training supervisory personnel who have the authority to develop and implement policy recommendations regarding laboratory procedures.
- The United States participated in FAO pilot training on Good Agricultural Practices and has provided US-sponsored training in Caribbean countries, Brazil, and Chile using a train-the-trainer model.

FOOD SAFETY SYSTEMS ASSESSMENTS

US agencies have participated as consultants to donor organizations performing food safety needs assessments of seven countries in Central America, including as part of hurricane reconstruction activities. In addition to reviews of production practices, legislative and regulatory capacity, the teams assessed food safety education needs.

US experts participated in the assessments of 14 nations of the Caribbean under the Caribbean Food Safety Initiative.² Existing agricultural health and food safety systems were reviewed to identify strengths and weaknesses. Improvements that will lead to harmony with WTO requirements and promote the safety and quality of domestic and imported products were identified. Teams used a protocol developed by the United States. Jointly developed recommendations for national food safety strategies are being used by the CARICOM nations in discussions with donor organizations.

US agencies also have performed foreign methods equivalency reviews.

MARKET AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS

US food-related technical assistance is provided in the area of market and socio-economic development. Projects, both short and long term, include:

- assessments of food safety regulatory and processing capabilities
- recommendations for remediation, establishment or enhancement of food production and processing businesses (especially small businesses) and
- assistance in developing capabilities in new food safety programs (e.g., HACCP) including food safety training.

These projects are primarily implemented through USAID, employing the resources of US government food safety agencies and private contractors and may be carried out in coordination with other donor organizations.

LESSONS LEARNED

1. CONSIDER HOW THE DESIRED OUTCOMES CAN BE SUSTAINED

When developing technical assistance programs countries should consider several elements that bear directly on the sustainability of the desired outcomes. The United States has developed a general approach to evaluating technical assistance activities. Under this approach, projects should:

- Be science-based.
- Include, whenever possible, partnerships with organizations that have proven expertise. This includes representatives of the public and private sectors, and academia when appropriate.
- Include a regional component when appropriate.
- Use “train-the trainer” models when appropriate.
- Address the issue of how the project/program will continue if there is a change of personnel.
- Include an evaluation component.

² The Caribbean Food Safety Initiative grew out of an agreement between the US Agency for International Development and the Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) to assist CARICOM countries in gaining support for implementing the necessary steps to achieve comprehensive agriculture and food safety systems.

2. DEVELOP CRITERIA TO ENSURE RESOURCES ARE USED APPROPRIATELY AND EFFECTIVELY

Because resources are limited, priorities for technical assistance must be established. Factors considered by the United States include whether the activity:

1. will result in a demonstrable improvement in the regulatory, enforcement or technical infrastructure of the country or organization;
2. is in response to an emerging or re-emerging international public health problem;
3. is requested by UN organizations (e.g., WHO and FAO); and
4. will improve US public health by increasing the ability to control public health risks associated with products exported to the United States.

Other considerations include whether the activity will conserve enforcement resources, if the activity can be uniquely carried out by US government personnel instead of through other organizations, whether the activity is necessary to support overall US foreign policy and/or trade objectives, and whether the foreign government or organization has the fundamental legal authority and basic technical competence to address the issue and the ability to influence the public health in the target country or region. This listing reflects US criteria, but we emphasize that each country providing technical assistance should develop its own criteria reflecting its needs and interests.

3. DEVELOP FOOD SAFETY EDUCATION STRATEGIES THAT ARE MULTI-LAYERED AND PRIORITIZED

Food safety education strategies should consider several levels of intervention and address a continuum of information needs. In assessing the needs of a country or region it is important to identify key information and training needs and set priorities for interventions.

Public awareness activities are intended to increase consumer awareness of food safety and the need to adopt improved hygiene practices. They should highlight both the public health and the economic importance of a safe food supply.

Outreach activities communicate basic information about food safety to a variety of specific audiences, such as primary producers, processors, and educators. Outreach activities may explain new initiatives and review export requirements with the intention of assisting the participating country to identify its need for specialized training.

Training activities are intended to build capacity to ensure the safety and quality of foods produced, processed and consumed.

4. THREE REQUIREMENTS FOR STRENGTHENING FOOD SAFETY SYSTEMS ARE SELF-ASSESSMENT, THE INVOLVEMENT OF DONOR ORGANIZATIONS, AND IMPROVED COORDINATION OF TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE

US involvement in country assessments has taught us that strengthening food regulatory and production infrastructures is necessary to effectively address food safety issues. We have also learned that country self-assessments are important in helping to identify priorities. Cooperation among donor organizations is necessary to achieve the goal of improved food safety. It is particularly important for development banks to be involved in technical assistance that involve physical infrastructure components (e.g. transportation, cold chain, water treatment systems.) While training is important, it may be of limited utility in the absence of proper infrastructure to support the training objectives. Finally, greater coordination among providers of technical assistance and donor organizations would be useful.

CONCLUSION

The United States continues to work on strengthening a coordinated strategy for providing food safety technical assistance. We remain committed to working with other nations on meaningful, sustainable food safety activities. In the near future, we expect to refine evaluation strategies, develop additional collaborative activities, and enhance partnerships with international and regional organizations.