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INTERNATIONAL STANDARD SETTING FOR FOOD SAFETY AND PLANT HEALTH – PROVISION OF SCIENTIFIC ADVICE AND CAPACITY BUILDING FOR DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

I. Introduction

1. FAO hosts the secretariats of two of the three international standard setting bodies explicitly mentioned in the World Trade Organization (WTO) Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement). These are the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex) and the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC). As the desire of developing countries increases to effectively participate in the standards setting process, there is a growing need to guarantee transparency and inclusiveness of the process, and to ensure universality of international standards setting. Establishing standards, which is a form of risk management, is not an isolated process. It is underpinned by the production of scientific data and their thorough and timely evaluation by independent experts (risk assessment).
2. FAO plays a major role in the provision of scientific advice to Codex and the IPPC as well as in capacity building of countries to generate scientific data of quality and representative of various geographical locations, thus warranting global legitimacy and relevance of Codex and IPPC standards, and to implement these standards once they have been adopted. This paper summarises the trends in, and challenges faced by, the provision of scientific advice and capacity building in support of international standards setting.

II. Provision of Scientific Advice

3. The scientific advice provided by FAO on matters related to plant health and food safety is an essential basis for development of international standards, guidelines and codes of practices for the IPPC and Codex. The advice provided is also used by FAO member countries in the management of plant health and food safety issues at national level. Reliable international risk assessments provide support to countries to meet their obligations under the WTO SPS

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agreement, particularly for countries that do not have the available expertise and funds to carry out their own risk assessments.

4. FAO devotes significant resources to providing scientific advice on food safety and plant health and ensuring its integrity through the application of the core principles of soundness, responsibility, objectivity, fairness, transparency and inclusiveness. In the area of food safety, established expert bodies, expert meetings or *ad hoc* consultations provide scientific advice on chemical and biological hazards in food as well as on practices and technologies used for food production. The outputs range from advice on safety of food additives, veterinary drug and pesticide residues and risks associated with food contaminants to the effectiveness of control options for biological hazards and the risks associated with new technologies. In emergency situations, rapid reviews/assessments are undertaken to provide interim scientific advice. In the area of plant health, FAO facilitates discussions amongst world phytosanitary experts to develop the basis for standards and guidance which, once adopted, are implemented nationally. This advice covers broad issues such as pest risk assessment, import and export systems and surveillance and eradication procedures as well as more specific information on procedures for diagnosis and phytosanitary treatments. Overall this advice provides the basis for stronger national plant protection programmes to prevent entry or spread of plant pests.

III. Capacity Building

5. FAO capacity building activities – both upstream and downstream of the work of the standard setting bodies – assure the continued global legitimacy of international standards.

6. Increasing demand for scientific advice to support international standardization leads to greater need for quality data and other pertinent information from countries to enable reliable risk assessments. This requires that countries are able to plan for the generation of data that contribute to the elaboration of standards of strategic interest and possess the required technical infrastructure and expertise.

7. Promoting increasingly effective participation of developing countries in the deliberations of standard setting bodies requires upstream work of strengthening the national institutions and programmes that facilitate input from interested stakeholders and experts to develop national positions.

8. While Codex and IPPC standards are essential tools for managing food safety and plant health, their mere existence is insufficient: countries must be able to implement standards. Most developing countries require technical assistance to achieve this.

9. FAO partners with its member countries to foster an enabling environment for standards development and implementation which requires a multi-sectoral approach. Limited human and financial resources in FAO impose the need for increasingly efficient ways of delivering assistance. This underlies FAO's growing focus on the development of guidelines, technical manuals and other tools that are made available to countries or development partners. These technical materials deal with specific elements of the national system of control such as laboratories or inspection systems, or cross-cutting issues as is the case of the food safety and phytosanitary capacity evaluation tools and risk analysis guides.

IV. The Way Forward

10. FAO's ability to respond in a timely and effective manner to growing demands from member countries for assistance in SPS capacity building requires that FAO intensify its efforts to develop strategic partnerships and new mechanisms to mobilize technical, financial and human resources. One such initiative recently launched by FAO and the World Health Organization

(WHO) is the Global Initiative for Food-related Scientific Advice (GIFSA)¹: a framework for mobilizing resources for the provision of scientific advice and for projects aimed at generating data from developing countries for consideration in the development of scientific advice. There are several examples of strategic partnerships and networks involving civil society groups, academic institutions, private sector associations that have supported development of capacity building tools and extended the reach of food safety and phytosanitary capacity building programmes. Strengthening and expanding these partnerships and networks while safeguarding FAO's neutrality and independence will allow the Organization to continue to serve its unique role in improving food safety and phytosanitary management in member countries.

11. FAO will place increased emphasis on policy support tools that assist policy makers in their decisions on investment in human resources, technical infrastructure and regulatory and non-regulatory programmes related to management of food safety and plant health.

12. FAO's decentralized offices at national, sub-regional and regional levels will play enhanced roles in aligning FAO's capacity building programmes with National Medium Term Programme Frameworks (NMTPFs) and regional priorities and improving collaboration with suitable implementation partners.

13. A growing number of agencies are involved in providing technical assistance in food safety and phytosanitary areas. FAO will continue to work towards improving coordination within the UN system and to enhancing the role of the Standards and Trade Development Facility in promoting better coordination among all concerned agencies.

¹ http://www.fao.org/ag/agn/agns/advice_en.asp