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SUMMARY

A Canadian Experience in Food Safety Capacity Building

Officials from Health Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) have participated in and contributed to numerous bilateral or multilateral meetings, workshops and projects in efforts to provide training and capacity building to developing countries. Recent training seminars and workshops were conducted by Health Canada and CFIA officials on procedures in conducting food safety and environmental assessments of foods derived from biotechnology. This led to the development and conducting of a number of hands-on workshops using actual case studies of the assessment of a genetically modified food as the next step in improving the capacity building process. This hands-on approach was used at a number of international workshops sponsored by different international organizations. Future joint sessions are now under consideration and a working group, headed by Canada with the participation of other countries, was established to develop an outline for a pilot training session involving food safety assessment.

Canadian lessons which were learned during these recent training initiatives include some of the following aspects: hands-on practical training provides the best opportunity in advancing training on food safety and environmental assessment; attendance at the training sessions will be facilitated with good coordination between the different food control agencies of developing countries; countries or organizations sponsoring the right individuals with the right qualifications will increase the transfer of training skills to their sponsoring countries; standardized train-the-trainer courses will ensure consistency and uniformity in application of training methods and international standards; joint training initiatives involving other developed countries will enhance the coordination and delivery of international training courses and workshops; and capacity building will be enhanced if the recipient countries take ownership in the training activities and invest in long-term infrastructure development.

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Introduction

Food safety capacity building, either on a bilateral or multilateral basis, has many advantages for developing and developed countries alike. For example, technical assistance to developing countries can facilitate harmonized international regulatory approaches for the safety assessment of foods and provide regulators in developing countries with information on the most recent advances in food safety systems. A secondary advantage is that it builds pockets of expertise in the region which can be used to assist other countries that do not have the necessary capacity. Better trained regulators can enhance the safety of foods thereby not only improving the health of its consumers but ensuring the safety of foods entering international trade. Finally, capacity building can help to ensure a transparent, science-based approach to the safe introduction and use of foods including new and modified foods.

Technical Assistance and Capacity Building

Canada notes that the relevant international organizations are now reviewing the most appropriate means of delivering technical assistance and capacity building to the developing countries. Consideration is being given to: greater coordination and cooperation on how technical assistance and capacity building is dispensed to developing countries; priorities and needs assessment to identify where opportunities exist for both short and long term training needs on food safety systems; and improved communications to avoid overlap and duplication and to maximize the use of limited resources for the benefit of both developed and developing countries.

The thorough and comprehensive nature of the Canadian food safety system and inspection programmes has received much recognition and attention at the international level. This is especially apparent as developing countries contact Canada for information and technical assistance to improve their regulatory infrastructure in order to enhance the safety of foods produced in or imported into their jurisdictions. Recent advances created by biotechnology, along with the challenges such as the emergence of new food pathogens and other health concerns have impacted on developing economies causing greater urgency and need for technical assistance and capacity building.

Technical and scientific personnel from Canada have participated in and contributed to numerous bilateral or multilateral meetings, workshops and projects in efforts to provide training or to transfer knowledge and experience to developing countries. Canada has provided training in many aspects related to enhanced capacity in various fields such as Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) systems, the development of legislation and regulatory systems and various aspect of inspection and laboratory control programs. Many training initiatives were conducted on a bilateral basis between countries, and others were conducted under the auspices of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC).

Canada also offers technical assistance to developing countries through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) which provides most of Canada's international development assistance to developing countries throughout the world. Examples of projects involving Canadian officials are the recently completed joint project with the Association of Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN) and Canada on a Fisheries Post Harvest Technology Project, and the CIDA sponsored "Private Sector Development Fund" project intended to

assist the Moroccan fish processing industry by drawing upon the CFIA model of quality management based on HACCP system of controls.

Another example is the workshop co-sponsored by the Inter-American Institute of Cooperation for Agriculture-Canada, the CFIA and HC for the English-speaking countries of the Caribbean that was designed to identify and develop strategies to enhance their participation in international standard setting fora such as the Codex Alimentarius Commission.

A Canadian Experience on Capacity Building in Food Safety Assessment

Recent technological advances in the field of foods derived from biotechnology have been especially challenging for developing countries in assessing the impact on their populations. Some developing countries have shown significant interest in acquiring the technical knowledge and skills to better manage the evaluation and regulatory control of these foods. To assist these countries, officials from HC and the CFIA have participated in a number of seminars both at home and abroad on the procedures in conducting food safety and environmental assessments of genetically modified foods. These seminars were found by the participants to be very helpful in establishing an initial understanding on the food safety and environmental assessment approaches. However, because of the complex nature of such assessments it was felt that hands-on training workshops using actual case studies would be highly beneficial in demonstrating the practical methodology and the need for a comprehensive regulatory framework.

This led to HC's development of a training module in food safety assessment for genetically modified food based on HC's "Guidelines for the Safety Assessment of Novel Foods¹" as the next step in the capacity building project. The module was piloted for regulators in Argentina and Chili. Subsequently, CFIA developed a modular training on environmental assessment. Both of the hands-on modular workshops were presented in Vancouver, British Columbia, in October 2000, attended by representatives from APEC countries including China, Indonesia, Peru, Korea, Vietnam, Hong Kong, Thailand and Australia. These training modules provided regulators with hands-on experience in the safety and environmental assessment of a modified food following Canadian guidelines. Participants found the training session to be very informative and appreciated the opportunity to carry out hands-on evaluation of actual data submitted by industry in support of the food safety assessment.

This approach was carried forward at another workshop on food safety assessment sponsored by ASEAN and International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) which was convened in Singapore in July 2001. The workshop involved 45 participants from Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. The Australian New Zealand Food Authority co-delivered this workshop with HC in a collaborative effort to promote a harmonized approach to the safety assessment of foods.

¹ A Novel food is defined under the Canadian Food and Drug Regulations as a substance or microorganism that does not have a history of safe use as a food, or a food that has undergone a process that has not been applied to that food or causes the food to undergo a major change, or a food derived from a plant, animal or organism that has been genetically modified.

Given the successes of these training initiatives future joint sessions are now under consideration between an APEC experts group and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Canada's capacity building initiatives were very well received by OECD member countries at a recent OECD Task Force for the Safety of Novel Foods and Feeds convened in Paris, in May 2001. A working group, headed by Canada with the participation of Australia, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States was established to develop an outline for a pilot OECD training session for the Russian Federation. This pilot effort, hopefully, will lead to the development of an internationally recognized training course on the safety assessment of foods originating from biotechnology which can serve as a template for further cooperative training efforts at the international level.

Some Lessons Learned

It is apparent from these recent training exercises that some developing countries need assistance to establish the technical capacity to make an adequate safety assessment of new products using a comprehensive regulatory framework such as that used by Canada. This situation is further compounded as many developed countries including Canada continue to expand their food safety capacity to protect their populations from exposure to human health risks thus creating additional disparity with developing countries. Canadian experiences and lessons which were learned during these recent training initiatives include some of the following aspects:

- hands-on practical training provides the best opportunity in advancing training on food safety and environmental assessment;
- attendance at the training sessions will be facilitated with good coordination between the food control agencies of developing countries;
- countries or organizations sponsoring the right individuals with the right qualifications will increase the transfer of training skills to their sponsoring countries;
- developing standardized train-the-trainer courses will ensure consistency and uniformity in application of training methods and international standards. Such courses will also provide a vital need for delivery of regional training programmes;
- joint training initiatives involving other developed countries will enhance the delivery of international training courses and workshops; and
- capacity building will be enhanced if the recipient countries have a sense of ownership in the activities and are prepared to invest in a long-term process including the appropriate human and monetary resources for infrastructure development.