



PAN AMERICAN HEALTH ORGANIZATION
WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION



152nd SESSION OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Washington, D.C., USA, 17-21 June 2013

Provisional Agenda Item 7.4

CE152/INF/4 (Eng.)
25 March 2013
ORIGINAL: SPANISH

REPORT ON THE 16th INTER-AMERICAN MEETING, AT THE MINISTERIAL LEVEL, ON HEALTH AND AGRICULTURE (RIMSA 16)

Agriculture—Health—Environment: Working Together for the Well-being of the Peoples of the Americas

Introduction

1. The 16th Inter-American Meeting, at the Ministerial Level, on Health and Agriculture (RIMSA 16) was organized jointly by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and the Government of Chile through its ministries of agriculture and health. The theme of the meeting, Agriculture—Health—Environment: Joining Forces for the Well-being of the Peoples of the Americas, was the focus of the presentations given and the technical events that preceded it (1).
2. Held shortly after the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, or Rio+20, the meeting helped underscore that the opportunities and challenges for humanity in the areas of nutrition and food security, food safety, and balanced, quality nutrition must be addressed in a manner fully in harmony with the environment.
3. In this context, prior to RIMSA 16, the Interagency Forum *Toward Integrated Epidemiological Surveillance* was held to inform participants about specific experiences in intersectoral coordination and joint activities among very diverse stakeholders. The forum also stressed the importance of systematic and timely information sharing, as well as the assessment, management, and communication of risks. (2) RIMSA 16 also took note of the resolutions and recommendations issued by the 12th Meeting of the Hemispheric Committee for the Eradication of Foot-and-mouth Disease (COHEFA 12) (3) and the 6th Meeting of the Pan American Commission on Food Safety (COPAIA 6) (4).

4. The ministerial forum approved the “Consensus of Santiago, Chile,” which urges countries to set up early warning systems and mechanisms for intersectoral coordination as part of the efforts to eliminate human rabies transmitted by dogs and eradicate foot-and-mouth disease from the Americas. It also called on the countries to intensify efforts and join forces to guarantee the production of safe and healthy food, which is essential for the prevention and control of chronic noncommunicable diseases—measures included in PAHO’s technical cooperation program in veterinary public health for the period 2014-2019. The importance of technical cooperation initiatives for national capacity-building was noted, and it was urged that such initiatives be implemented with the utmost interagency cooperation and with the coverage and continuity required to achieve their objectives, targets, and results (5).

Background

5. The Region of the Americas has a long tradition of political and technical dialogue between ministries of health and agriculture, dating back to 1968, the year of the First Inter-American Meeting on Foot-and-mouth Disease and Zoonoses Control (RICAZ). In 1980, the name of the meeting was changed to Inter-American Meeting, at the Ministerial Level, on Animal Health, replacing the acronym RICAZ with RIMSA. In 1999, the name of the meeting was changed again—this time to Inter-American Meeting, at the Ministerial Level, on Health and Agriculture, retaining RIMSA as the acronym.

6. RIMSA 12, held in Brazil in 2001, was a historical milestone. For the first time, the ministers of agriculture and health both participated, making it the only permanent regional and global forum at the highest political level for dialogue between the health and agriculture sectors, contributing to advances in health and agriculture in the Region.

7. This forum addresses international cooperation in areas related to veterinary public health. It brings together representatives from the health and agriculture sectors, along with representatives of international organizations, with the private sector participating as an observer. The meeting looks for new ways of dealing with cooperation issues, while transcending institutional and intersectoral boundaries.

8. RIMSA guides PAHO’s joint technical cooperation activities with the countries in veterinary public health.

9. The 16th Inter-American Meeting, at the Ministerial Level, on Health and Agriculture (RIMSA 16) was held in Santiago, Chile from 26 to 27 July 2012. It was convened by the Director of the Pan American Sanitary Bureau, pursuant to Resolution CD17.R19 adopted by the 17th Directing Council of PAHO in 1967 and Resolution CD43.R5, adopted by the 43rd Directing Council in 2001.

Situation Analysis

10. RIMSAs analyzed the opportunities and challenges of sustainably meeting the growing demand for affordable, quality food and producing it in an environmentally friendly way while protecting the health of consumers and individuals involved in the agri-food chain. It also considered the lessons learned for risk management in the nexus between human health, food production, and the ecosystem (1).

11. The Region of the Americas is a major food producer. For many of its countries, the agricultural sector is not one of the most important but *the* most important generator of jobs and foreign exchange. In Latin America and the Caribbean, one out of every 12 of the subregion's almost 600 million inhabitants suffers from hunger, (6) while at the same time, one of every five is overweight or obese, (7) making food security and nutritional quality initiatives extremely important.

12. The expansion and intensification of crop and livestock production are associated with a growing risk of disease outbreaks and occupational and environmental health problems, as well as antimicrobial resistance (8, 9).

13. Given their social and economic importance, foodborne diseases constitute one of the main risks to the growing food trade. While the eradication of these diseases is impossible, initiatives for their prevention and control from the farm to the table have managed to reduce their incidence. Nearly 17% of the public health emergencies of international concern reported within the framework of the International Health Regulations (2005) are connected with the safety of food for human consumption. (10) Studies of the burden of foodborne diseases are increasingly necessary, as are efforts to strengthen the countries' capacity to determine their causes.

14. Diseases common to humans and animals continue to pose a constraint to the production and marketing of food products of animal origin and are the cause of serious public health problems. In the past decade, three out of every four of the identified pathogens that affect humans are of zoonotic origin with animal reservoirs or vector- and food-borne transmission.

15. The rabies virus is present in most of the countries of the Region, with several pathogens associated with specific species of animals maintaining its presence and spread. While for many years, rabies transmitted by dogs was responsible for the majority of cases in humans, the disease is well under control and nearing eradication. However, the risk of rabies transmitted by wildlife persists, making it essential to maintain intensive epidemiological surveillance and control programs. Implementation of the regional rabies control program has reduced the number of human cases by approximately 95% (from 355 cases in 1982 to 10 in 2012). Canine rabies has been reduced by 98% (from 25,000

cases in 1980 to 250 in 2012). Several countries have been declared free of human rabies transmitted by dogs, and out of 35 countries in the Americas, only 7 now report cases of human rabies transmitted by dogs.

16. A host of zoonotic diseases—i.e., plague, brucellosis, tuberculosis, cysticercosis, hydatidosis, trichinosis, and fascioliasis—that were once the target of control initiatives, with significant achievements in many cases, still persist. It is therefore advisable to consolidate their control and definitive elimination to avoid the terrible consequences of their reactivation. Other zoonotic diseases, such as leishmaniasis, fall under the heading of “neglected diseases,” which primarily affect the most vulnerable populations—that is, the poorest and most marginalized groups with less access to health services. Prevention and control of these diseases require a multisectoral approach.

17. Global events and activities such as trade, tourism, and ecotourism, migration, urbanization, and changes in production processes have led to the appearance and spread of emerging infectious diseases, whose immediate detection and control call for close ties between the public health, animal health, and environmental sectors. In this context, concepts like “One health” become particularly important, as they promote and contribute to intersectoral linkage and coordination and the involvement of diverse disciplines with the know-how to achieve a common objective: the health and well-being of the population.

18. The Region is perpetually subject to natural disasters of many types, some of them attributable to climate change. In their wake, old health risks increase and new ones emerge, the quality of life is diminished, large numbers of people and animals, both domestic and wild, are displaced, food becomes scarce, and new conditions arise that affect the interaction between humans and animals, especially wildlife.

19. The Region has participated in a variety of activities for the prevention, control, and elimination of emerging infectious diseases, among them severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) (Canada), bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) (the United States, Canada, and Brazil), and the highly pathogenic avian influenza (Mexico). This confirms the importance of strengthening capacity in the countries to improve and maintain their knowledge and skills, thereby enabling them to react quickly and effectively to the risks associated with these types of problems.

20. Vector-borne diseases in the Region of the Americas have constituted a serious socioeconomic burden whose impact up to now not been exhaustively studied. Bubonic plague, Chagas disease, dengue, malaria, leishmaniasis, yellow fever, several arboviral diseases, and other diseases require a multisectoral intervention to successfully learn about and control them.

21. Other diseases of animal origin, such as foot-and-mouth disease, have been the focus of major public-private control and elimination initiatives. For years, the Region has had an extensive disease-free area covering North America, Central America, and the Caribbean. However, there are still countries and areas in South America where the disease is endemic, jeopardizing the progress made. In this subregion, countries invest over US\$1.3 billion annually in efforts to achieve its eradication by 2020. These initiatives have been implemented under the Plan of Action 2011-2020 of the Hemispheric Program for the Eradication of Foot-and-mouth Disease (PHEFA), (11) with PAHO/WHO, through PANAFTOSA, serving as an entity for technical consultation. The reemergence of foot-and-mouth disease in countries and regions that export livestock products generates major economic losses, as demonstrated by recent cases, such as that of Paraguay, where the disease inflicted substantial losses, cutting the country's gross domestic product (GDP) by approximately one third. In addition, the structural measures and advances and the epidemiological intelligence provided by the animal health sector to eradicate foot-and-mouth disease have become especially important for the prevention and control of emerging infectious diseases.

22. All of this underscores the ever-growing need to maintain and improve coordination between public health and animal health services for the prevention, timely detection, control, and elimination of the risks to public health from zoonotic diseases, either because they jeopardize the production and trade of food products of animal origin, as with foot-and-mouth disease, or because they cause diseases in humans.

Action by the Executive Committee

23. The Executive Committee is requested to take note of this information document and the reports of RIMSA 16.

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