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FRESH PRODUCE

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Summary

1. It is important to recognize and underscore that when it comes to food, one of the main causes of concern for the majority of consumers worldwide is the presence of natural contaminants, pesticide residues, and fertilizers in the food supply—and more recently, biological threats from highly pathogenic organisms that are multidrug resistant. This situation has imposed the inescapable obligation on governments, organizations of private producers, academia, and institutions working to develop food safety technologies to safeguard public health by protecting animal and plant health.
2. At the 1986 Uruguay Round of the GATT, a commitment was made to impose greater discipline in three aspects of agriculture: access to markets, direct and indirect subsidies, and sanitary and phytosanitary measures. In 1994, Costa Rica, together with the Ministers of the majority of the countries participating in the Uruguay Round, signed the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures. This Agreement has contributed to a radical transformation in practices connected with the production and marketing of foods of animal and plant origin, preventing these practices from becoming a justification for the imposition of trade barriers.
3. As in most countries, most of the risks and adverse effects of food contamination on health and nutrition have been identified in Costa Rica. However, recognition of these adverse effects often bears no relation to the prevention policies and activities adopted or their monitoring and follow-up. State institutions are still not in a position to oversee the activities of all fruit and vegetable producers. For these important tasks it will be necessary to develop programs that address the education and organization of producers.
4. Many of the risks to health stemming from fruit and vegetable production derive from the use of inappropriate techniques or their improper use with certain crops.
5. Today, given the rapid and sweeping changes in society, culture, and technology worldwide, health is not the only reason why food safety has become both a challenge and an imperative. Globalization, synonymous with greater competitiveness among the producers who sell their products in the local, regional, or world markets, is currently the driving force behind food safety. Since both change and globalization call for the market to make safe food available to consumers, the design and implementation of integrated food safety systems cannot be ignored or put off. These systems have more far-reaching effects than the isolated piecemeal activities of public and private institutions working for the prevention, surveillance, and verification of the application of measures and standards designed to guarantee food security and the quality and safety of goods for human consumption.

6. We must foster processes that integrate and harmonize the participation of producers, the State, and consumers in programs and projects that promote production while lowering the incidence of diseases and risks transmitted through agricultural products and environmental pollution. Such processes must promote shared responsibilities and obligations to meet the food safety goals that we are setting for ourselves to improve the quality of life of our citizens and procure a larger, more profitable share of the markets for our producers.

7. Food security is the right of every individual, a concept that extends beyond access to nourishing food to include food safety. Guaranteeing citizens the necessary variety of safe, quality food for their table each day requires an approach that lends coherence to this concept. This approach must be properly integrated into the coherent, coordinated structure of a functional regulatory body that turns the new ideology covering production “from the farm to the table” into effective action. This structure would serve as the foundation for the design and implementation of an Integrated National Food Safety Plan, supported primarily by an integrated, computerized information system with a database containing all the available information from the public and private agencies that work most directly with food safety issues—a system capable of providing users with timely information.

8. Costa Rica has the basic elements in place to carry out a project in the short term that will breathe life into the objectives of integration and multisectoral coordination. Given its organizational and functional characteristics and its efforts to achieve the best results from its efforts, the Intersectoral Commission on Food Safety (CIIA) could become the driving force behind the food safety project that the country needs to improve the sanitary conditions of food production and, hence, competitiveness required by the new demands of the market.

Introduction

9. Agricultural food production plays a strategic role in Costa Rica’s economy. The sector contributes 24% of the value added of national output and 73% of all exports, and it is the country’s most important generator of foreign exchange. Until 1997, it accounted for 75% of the nation’s exports. Although the sector’s relative share of exports has declined because of growth in other industrial sectors (especially microprocessor manufacturing), in absolute terms, foreign sales of agricultural food products continue to grow (from US\$ 1,300 million in 1992 to \$2,300 million in 1998). Depending on the origin of the capital and the volume of production, this activity is performed by small, medium, and large producers of capital stock, medium producers and companies with mixed capital, and some major companies owned by transnational corporations. Some

125,000 people throughout the nation's territory are employed in fruit and vegetable production.

10. The 1987 tax incentives program to stimulate nontraditional exports resulted in an increase in the number of products listed under the 40 main headings of the export basket: 31 of these (77.5%) are nontraditional goods. This sector also contributes significantly to employment, accounting for 27% of the EAP. Coffee, bananas, and sugarcane account for the largest share of exports. In the food industry, important export activities are the preparation of dairy products, the processing and packaging of fruits and vegetables, and the manufacture of beverages .

11. Food safety is vital to public health. Between 1995 and 1999, Costa Rica recorded 601,850 cases of diarrhea, 600,000 of which involved foodborne disease (FBD). During that same period, FBDs were the second leading cause of mortality among diseases requiring compulsory notification (561 deaths). Of the 5,864 hospital discharges in 1997, 45% involved diarrheal diseases, with children under 10 years the most affected group (22% of the population).

12. Clearly, guaranteeing food safety is essential to the country's food security as well as public health, the health of individuals and groups, plant and animal health, and access to the highly competitive markets whose rules favor the more-developed countries. The situation demands that our countries adjust their sanitary and phytosanitary measures and all others required to preserve food safety. We must also adopt the standards and regulations governing the international livestock trade, pursuant to the commitments related to the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures and the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

13. The document submitted by Costa Rica to the 13th Inter-American Meeting, at the Ministerial Level, on Health and Agriculture, outlines the country's food safety situation, describing its successes and difficulties in this area, as well the outlook for its continued progress in developing processes that will enable it to meet greater and more ambitious objectives. In order to achieve this, these processes must clearly employ a conceptual and methodological approach that is at once multidisciplinary and intersectoral—an approach in which institutions and organizations in the public and private sectors act as one. This is the proper approach for handling the diversity that springs from the origin and nature of the risks and from their impact on the different areas, which must integrate their activities as quickly as possible to safeguard public health and secure higher levels of international competitiveness.

14. One of the country's most significant efforts to meet these objectives has been its recent creation (1999) of a technical advisory body known as the CIIA under Decree No.

30083-S-MAG. The main functions of the CIIA, comprised of representatives from the public and private institutions linked most closely with this field, are specifically “to coordinate, facilitate, and promote the efforts of public entities, private organizations, and society as a whole to guarantee food safety, with a view to promoting public health, animal and plant health, and fair and equitable trade.” The CIIA is just getting off the ground, but, owing to its structure and organization, it has all the necessary qualities to become the focal point for strategic integration and coordination of public and private efforts in this field.

The Food Safety System: From the Farm to the Table

15. With the creation of the CIIA, which commenced operations in September 1998, Costa Rica took its first steps toward creating a system that would integrate the activities of ministries, government institutions, universities, and private sector groups in this field.

16. One of the CIIA’s main objectives is to establish a National Quality Assurance and Food Safety System and get it up and running. To accomplish this, since 1999 the Commission has provided training for policymakers, academics, and technical personnel from national and international organizations and worked to raise awareness among them. It has contributed to the intersectoral coordination process required to create the National Quality Assurance and Food Safety System and an information system to support decision-making in the pertinent institutions and entities. A key component of the System would be the creation of an information network to assist government and national and regional industry in their efforts to prevent the transmission of FBDs and guarantee safety at all stages of the process that takes food from production centers to the consumer’s table.

Use of Information, Early Warning, Surveillance, and Risk Assessment Systems

17. Costa Rica still lacks an information system on food safety that gathers FBD data from the pertinent public and private agencies to keep civil society and the scientific community properly informed, much less a system of traceability that can furnish information on the entire process, from production through final consumption. A major stumbling block is the lack of information on matters related both to processed products (for example, raw materials, supplies, equipment, laboratory testing, inspection seals) and to fresh products (i.e., organization, cleanliness, personal hygiene, and the removal of harmful agents). These are a few of the problems identified in food processing plants, all of which can be traced to the lack of a standard form for the coded entries used in collecting production information by lot and processing date; each company has its own system.

18. In our country, for example, many public agencies, academic institutions, and research centers have databases: the Ministry of Health (food protection, drugs, etc.); the Ministry of Agriculture (the protection of animal and plant health); National Production Council (quality in agriculture), National Accreditation Agency (registry of companies and laboratories), Costa Rican Institute of Water Supply and Sewerage Systems (sanitary surveillance and vulnerability of municipal water supply systems), the Costa Rican Institute for Research and Education in Nutrition and Health, and the University of Costa Rica (registry of food industry suppliers).

19. In addition to creating an information system that in its initial stages would collect information from the aforementioned databases, components must be added that will maintain traceability and facilitate early warnings of disease and pest outbreaks. Both are essential for providing daily information on food exports. In short, what the country needs in terms of information and where the current administration wishes to make a special effort is the creation of a health information system that will lend greater transparency to the national, regional, and global food trade.

20. Creating an integrated information system on food safety would not be very difficult in Costa Rica. The relevant public and private institutions have databases with pertinent information, depending on their degree of involvement in food-related matters. Efforts in this area must begin with a decision at the political highest level, which must be followed by international technical cooperation and private sector support. The three actors involved must pull together to build a system that from the very outset is recognized by all sectors that benefit from the fragmented information currently generated--sectors that will benefit even more from the information products developed by a system designed to support surveillance for prevention, control, and the monitoring of the entire process from the farm to the table or from the farm to the consumer.

21. The following is a description of the most relevant components and how they are monitored, based on the studies and risk assessments conducted in our country:

- (a) **Selection of seeds.** The National Seed Office is responsible for the quality of domestic and imported seeds but not their genetic content. There are no express regulations in this respect for the domestic market, which means that genetically modified (transgenic) organisms are present. Furthermore, many farmers use their own seeds with no real quality or sanitary control. Efforts are made, insofar as possible, to ensure that the treatments applied during germination meet with international standards.
- (b) **Fertilizer use.** Fertilizer use is not based on testing for soil nutrient content, which has led to overfertilization and/or the use of products inappropriate to the

- physiology of crops. (Only transnational companies and major producers conduct these tests). Nitrate and nitrite build-up in leafy vegetables is a matter of serious concern. On the other hand, the underuse of fertilizers in crop production, especially in fruit and vegetable production, impacts negatively on the ability of produce to hold up during transport, leading to a deterioration in the tissues of these products and allowing surface contaminants to penetrate the inner tissues. Overfertilization leads to the pollution of surface- and groundwater, jeopardizing the quality of water for human consumption and irrigation.
- (c) **Use of agrochemicals.** In certain types of crops—especially vegetables—agrochemicals are used to offset the effects of climatic conditions unfavorable to the production of species exogenous to the tropics and to meet the quality standards of local and export markets. In Costa Rica, agrochemicals are freely imported and sold. The Ministries of Agriculture and Health monitor only the quality, labeling, and registry of these products. Once registered, they are sold freely, with no specific training required for their use. Farmers are clearly ill-informed about agrochemicals and have not been offered other options that would serve as substitutes. However, stricter controls are used for export products, because residues in produce can lead to the destruction of the goods and the closing of international markets. The Integrated Agricultural Marketing Program (PIMA) has recently published food safety guidelines for farmers. In addition, the National Production Council (CNP) and the Post-Harvest Technology Laboratory at the University of Costa Rica have developed food safety programs targeting farmer’s associations. These activities have not been enough, however, to reduce agrochemical use. Lack of good information could be one of the main reasons for this.
- (d) **Irrigation.** There are no studies on the microbiological quality of water used in irrigation in Costa Rica. Since the 1990s, the unbridled growth of cities has led to urban sprawl, encroaching on agricultural areas throughout the country. This phenomenon poses a serious threat to the water sources used in irrigation because of the fecal contamination and solid and industrial waste that this growth produces; farms located near population centers are especially affected. A recent decree contains measures on wastewater treatment, and the National Irrigation and Drainage Service (SENARA) has been building irrigation infrastructure. However, its plans of action still do not call for monitoring the quality of water for irrigation; this is done only by companies and growers that use drip irrigation or sprinkler systems, where water quality directly affects the efficiency and durability of the systems. Farmers generally lack the mechanisms to perform this type of monitoring.

Policies, Legislation, and Regulations to Guarantee the Safety and Quality of Food

22. **Policies.** The plans and strategies that constitute the framework for the present Administration's activities include policy guidelines and measures to remedy the country's current weaknesses and shortcomings in food safety. This matter is considered part of food security. The Government Plan 2002-2006 emphasizes food security as one of the main strategies for combating poverty. The National Development Plan 2002-2006 (Ministry of Planning and Economic Policy), the National Agricultural Development Plan, and the document *Policies for the Agricultural Sector* (Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock) establish food safety objectives and activities, aimed at protecting people, animals, and plants from the risks posed by the use of agrochemicals.

23. These instruments contain major commitments: to re-create and strengthen the Secretariat for Food and Nutrition Policy (SEPAN), created under the Organic Law of the Ministry of Health, enacted in 1997, (Art.25 of the Law) as an advisory body to the Ministers of Health to deal with this issue, and to institute other relevant policy measures that affect food safety (for example, reorienting phytosanitary services toward monitoring, supervision, inspection, sampling, diagnosis, and quality assurance for agricultural imports and exports); to develop programs that guarantee safety, quality, and the monitoring of pesticide residues; and to promote accreditation, certification, and food inspection. The goal is to increase comparative advantages and lower barriers to the admission of Costa Rican agricultural products to the markets. These instruments also give priority to coordination with other sectors, institutions, and producers' organizations that work in food safety, emphasizing an integrated approach to transgenic crops and their impact on biodiversity and human health, regulation of trade in genetically modified organisms, intellectual property, and relevant ethical issues. Efforts are under way to build consensus on a national stance to address this issue in all its dimensions.

24. Other important measures are aimed at establishing an inspection code for regional industrial plants and promoting harmonization and uniform regulations in regional sanitary measures, arranging for technical cooperation with agricultural protection agencies (RIOPPAH, IICA, FAO).

25. Food security and food safety are also emerging as significant issues for the Costa Rican People's Defense Agency. At year's end 2001, this agency conducted a thorough study of the pernicious effects on public health of the use and abuse of agrochemicals in mass food production. It also studied the adverse impact of these chemicals on food security and the physical environment in which people live, describing the situation and the problems it poses. The findings of this study have been used to back the Bureau's recommendations to the President of the Republic and eight public institutions (ministries and decentralized agencies) about the action that they should take to guarantee food

security and food safety. Under the regulations of the Law governing the Costa Rican People's Defense Agency, public agencies have 15 business days to respond with a report stating the steps they propose to take to comply with the recommendations, the time it will take to do so, and the name and position of the official in charge. The Costa Rican People's Defense Agency is among the nation's most respected institutions and one in which citizens have the greatest confidence. Its intervention constitutes a guarantee of government protection of food safety.

Current Legislation and Regulations to Guarantee the Safety and Quality of Food

26. The legal framework for the current laws and standards governing food safety consists of the conventions and agreements signed by Costa Rica, whose scope is multilateral (WTO), regional (General Treaty on Central American Economic Integration), and bilateral (free trade agreements with Mexico, Dominican Republic and Panama); it is also based on domestic legislation, regulations, and standards.

27. The country's domestic legislation has been changing to meet the demands of globalization. However, there is no study comparing current laws in Costa Rica with international standards, only partial-scope studies. The MEIC and Codex drew up a list comparing a number of technical regulations with public standards. However, it offers only a limited view of this matter. Other agencies have explored the domestic legislation but have not obtained an exhaustive knowledge of the subject. Legislation dating back to the 1920s currently exists side by side with recent laws.

28. Current policies in food safety require a rethinking of sanitary systems. The country assumes new commitments when it signs and ratifies treaties and agreements that imply changes in its production model. Today, safeguarding food has assumed the dimensions of a chain of production, considering every stage through which the food passes from the farm to the table. Thus, domestic legislation is being adapted to international regulations. The standards, guidelines, and recommendations issued by the international organizations are taken as the frame of reference for developing technical regulations for sanitary and phytosanitary measures, food quality, and food safety and putting them into practice.

Legislative Harmonization with the Agreements of the World Trade Organization (WTO) and National Standards (Codex Alimentarius)

29. Costa Rica has continued to make progress toward meeting the commitments in the WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures. It has passed legislation to create the information and operational agencies stipulated in that Agreement. In addition, the country has enacted a Phytosanitary Protection Law, reorganized the State phytosanitary service, and created a National Commission on

Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures, an Irrigation Analysis Unit, and a Zoosanitary and Phytosanitary Information and Notification Center.

30. Growth of the international produce trade has resulted in the adoption of laws and standards to protect consumer health. Consumer protection today is a matter of great concern among the countries, which have enacted laws and standards to protect consumer health and stimulate agricultural exports. This has heightened the risks to normal trade flows. New agencies have been needed to harmonize the adoption of international standards to facilitate trade and prevent the emergence of trade barriers. These agencies are Codex Alimentarius, the International Plant Protection Convention, and the World Animal Health Organization (formerly the International Office of Epizootics).

31. The Codex Coordinating Committee was created through Decree 1795-MEIC of 23 September 1986. Its members are representatives of the National Office of Standards and Measures, the Ministries of Agriculture and Health, the National Center for Science and Technology (CITA), and the National Commission for Research in Science and Technology (CONICIT). The Coordinating Committee has set up technical subcommittees around the country to study the Codex documents by areas of specialization. This has facilitated their wider dissemination and provided a better technical foundation for the National Committee's pronouncements in the Codex Alimentarius Secretariat.

32. The current national regulations governing food products and food additives have been harmonized with the international Codex standards, which have been adopted partially or in their entirety, as the case may be. Costa Rica's legislation calls for application of the Codex standard when no pertinent national standard exists. The Codex Codes of Hygienic Practice are also the basis for national regulations governing the operation of food processing plants. Below are some of the Codex standards that have been adopted in Costa Rica:

- Labeling of foods and additives
- Tuna fish
- Powdered cream,
- Milk (Condensed, powdered, evaporated),
- Bacon, ham, sausage,
- Suckling pig, minced meat, corned beef,
- Butter, sour cream, yogurt, mayonnaise, and
- Heart of palm.

33. The Ministry of Health monitors compliance with sanitary standards. Violations incur the sanctions stipulated in the General Health Law, which bear no relation to the severity of the violation. This gives rise to the frequent application of special measures for the retention, seizure, and destruction of products that pose a threat to health, cancellation of the sanitary operating permit or product registration, and the definitive closure of the establishment. These actions do not preclude the application of civil and criminal sanctions, fines set by law (Law No.7472), and civil action or criminal charges.

34. The National Office of Standards and Measures is responsible for surveillance and the enforcement of Law No.7472. It has an ongoing program for sampling and testing products at the point of sale; violation of the standards results in legal action. The current food quality standards operate within the framework of the National Quality System, in four areas:

- Measurement (applied by the MEIC, which has legal standing, to the sale of services),
- Technical regulation (inspection power),
- Accreditation (done by ENA, under the MEIC), and
- Standards (drafted by the Costa Rican Institute for Technical Standardization (INTECO), at the request of the industry.

35. Notwithstanding the current legal framework to ensure adequate monitoring of food safety, that the State does not have the infrastructure and trained human resources to verify compliance.

36. **Traceability systems.** The current application of food safety laws makes it impossible to trace products efficiently. In the case of fresh produce, it is difficult to identify the producers in the distribution chain. Likewise, the current registry system does not allow importers of products manufactured outside the country to identify producers, mainly due to the lack of a timely, streamlined information system. The decrees governing food traceability are being revised to eliminate red tape that hinders free trade. Nevertheless, several national companies have designed traceability systems for their suppliers and distributors. Partial traceability systems are used in the marketing of fresh fruits and vegetables and the processing of chicken and chicken byproducts. They are also used in slaughterhouses for cattle and pigs and in the production of certain canned goods, sausages, and milk products. This it makes it easier to identify the parties legally responsible for the safety of these products.

Institutional Structure of Food Safety Programs

37. The Costa Rican State has the responsibility for establishing national policies and strategies in food safety. It does this through its institutions, coordinating with private sector organizations (agricultural and industrial sectors, academia, and consumers) and working together to draft the necessary regulations to monitor compliance and evaluate the proposed objectives.

38. The institutions that operate in the area of food safety are State ministries, decentralized institutions, national programs, and public universities. This first group is made up of the ministries of Health (the steering agency in food safety), Agriculture and Livestock (which draws up and implements agricultural policies with respect to sanitary and phytosanitary measures and the safety of fresh produce), Economy, Industry, and Trade (which drafts and coordinates food standards), Foreign Trade (which promotes, facilitates, and consolidates the country's participation in the international economy), and Education (which develops educational programs to promote good agricultural practices and safe food handling).

39. As to the other public institutions that, in conjunction with the State ministries, work in areas connected with food safety, the responsibility for promoting quality in exports of fresh produce falls to the National Production Council, which also seeks to improve the competitiveness of agribusiness. It exercises this function within the framework of a cooperative agreement with the National Chamber of Agriculture and Agribusiness (CNAA), sharing activities to provide training and education to fresh fruit and vegetable produces and raise their awareness about quality and safety issues. The Government of the Republic considers this program to be in the national interest, since it is a tool for transferring technology to agribusinesses, enabling them to increase their competitiveness and obtain certification of their products in the short and medium term. The intersectoral partnership became a reality by Executive Decree at the end of 2002, and in the few months that have elapsed since then, efforts have been under way to put together the National Project to Promote Food Quality and to train 200 small and medium producers of fresh farm products.

40. The Costa Rican Institute of Fisheries and Aquiculture promotes and regulates the marketing of seafood products; the National Training Institute and the Technical Schools develop training programs for producers and food handlers; the Costa Rican Institute for Research and Teaching in Nutrition and Health exercises the steering role in scientific research, health technology development, and nutrition; the State universities provide professional training for human resources, and the Comprehensive Livestock Marketing Program oversees wholesale and regional markets.

41. Public institutions may delegate activities through accreditation, inspection, certification of quality, and chemical and microbiological food testing. This mechanism allows for greater efficiency in justifying the confidence of producers, industrialists, and consumers.

42. The responsibility for training, scientific research, and technology development can be assumed by the State; it can also be assumed by the universities and private enterprise. The following activities can be delegated: inspection, certification, laboratory testing, human resource training and consumer education, and research and development. Those that cannot be delegated are: policy-making, the drafting of rules and regulations, accreditation, State oversight, and surveillance.

43. **The National Commission and local commissions.** Globalization of the market affects Costa Rica's trading partners and consumers alike. The country has understood the urgent need to hasten efforts to integrate the institutions responsible for food safety and to foster cooperation among them to give users better quality services. For example, in exercising its steering role in public health, the Ministry of Health is responsible today for regulating, accrediting, and monitoring the operations of services provided by public and private entities. As part of its role, it also supports food surveillance and protection systems by making available the physical facilities and additional laboratory resources of other State, private, or academic institutions to ensure a faster, more reliable response to the demands placed on it. It is also working to create a corps of inspectors from all the institutions responsible for monitoring the quality and safety of food, offering training to ensure that the inspectors apply uniform criteria.

44. Several consultative bodies have been created to work in specific areas of food safety. One of them is the Commission on Deregulation, in charge of reviewing the laws and regulations governing the registry, monitoring, export, and import of food products to eliminate unnecessary demands and paperwork that hinder and even prevent efficient health and environmental protection. Another body is the Technical Advisory Commission on the Nutritional Value of Foods, made up of representatives of public and private institutions (CACIA, Ministry of Health, CCSS, MEIC, INCIENSA, CITA, and the University of Costa Rica's School of Nutrition). This Commission was created to promote changes in food labeling standards to ensure that labels give an indication of nutritional quality

44. The intent is to create an agency that will integrate the ministers that deal the issue of food safety into the organizational structure of the Presidency of the Republic, which would establish policies and strategies in this field.

45. The country has serious shortcomings in terms of a community organization that can address food safety issues at the local level. The cantonal agricultural centers (ACC/MAG) manage the agricultural fairs, which serve as the informal markets for fresh produce, providing technical assistance and selling supplies to producers. However, they still lack food safety programs.

46. All of the above notwithstanding, specific mention should be made of the PAHO/INCAP project, which has been highly successful in promoting food and nutrition security in border areas of Central America. Under these activities, both theory and practice include food safety components. The PAHO/INCAP project has helped to strengthen local governments and grassroots organizations in the border communities in which it operates. Representatives of institutions and organizations in these towns are involved in the project execution and coordination of the project through cantonal councils on food and nutrition security. The objective of coordinating the activities of municipalities, government institutions, and nongovernmental organizations in the area of food and nutrition security has begun to bear fruit in a little under five years. This can be seen in the results of our country's III Food and Nutrition Security Fair, whose activities included the evaluation of project outcomes in the Region.

47. Another major regional initiative under that same conceptual and operational framework is Project FAORLC-54496 on Food Security in Meso-America, which all the Central American countries have joined and which will soon begin implementation under the aegis of CORECA, the Central American Agricultural Council (ACC), and the ministries of agriculture of the participating countries. The Project's goal is to build on the results of regional cooperation projects that expired in 2002, among them: "Strengthening of National Codex Committees and Application of their Standards," "Support for the Central American Agricultural Trade in Policies, International Negotiations, and the Application of Sanitary and Food Safety Measures." The particular emphasis is on the application of results rather than the design of trade and food safety regulations.

48. It is expressly acknowledged that the greatest efforts to promote intersectoral coordination in food safety were those of CIIA, which began working in this area even before its formal constitution by executive decree in 2001 (Decree No.30083-S-MAG of 22 October 2001). The need for coordination transcended the need for its official establishment, promoted by middle management, government ministries, private associations, and other sectors.

49. This interdisciplinary commission, which works *ad hoc*, has had great success in the strategic planning of food safety and training systems. It has received strong backing from IICA, FAO, and RIOPPAH to organize training courses, round tables, conferences,

planning workshops, and forums on the issue of food safety, with the managerial objectives of intersectoral integration and coordination. Its development and consolidation depend on support from the country's political authorities and its domestic and international partners, which contribute technical and financial resources to provide a solid foundation for the implementation of its operating plan.

50. With regard to educating citizens about food safety, the most relevant institutions do not yet have systematic mass education programs for all social sectors, even though the Effective Consumer Promotion and Protection Law makes the State responsible for promoting and protecting the consumer. The MEIC's Trade and Consumer Protection Area, created in response to this legal mandate, is in charge of developing training programs for consumer and business organizations. However, citizen participation is still not exercised by groups truly representative of consumers—groups that could be considered the official voice of consumers in decision-making processes. There *are* some elite organizations, such as the Chambers, which lodge protests and take action when food safety issues affect their interests.

51. For public health alerts, the country has an epidemiological surveillance system that studies foodborne diseases; however, it cannot identify the etiologic agents or foods involved. It still has no program to keep consumers informed about the risks of ingesting contaminated products. Food hygiene and safe food handling campaigns are launched only when citizens must be alerted to emergencies caused by bacterial or viral contamination.

Technical Cooperation Required at the National and Regional Level

52. Costa Rica requires technical cooperation to hasten progress in addressing all deficits in the public and private institutions that comprise its extensive national food safety system. It is neither rational nor effective to continue offering solutions and allocating the always limited resources in a piecemeal fashion, responding to the demands of each sector, institution, or agency individually without attempting to articulate them conceptually and operationally. An integrated approach, rather than a fragmented one, is needed. Here, public and private agencies work side by side to design a national project, whose overriding development objective is to meet needs comprehensively with the most modern, effective tools available. Formulating and implementing this approach demand international technical cooperation resources.

53. The State institutions most closely linked with the international organizations working in food safety—that is, the Ministries of Agriculture and Livestock; Health; and Foreign Trade, the Economy, and Trade—participate little in the meetings of these organizations, even though major issues are discussed and decisions made about different

aspects of food safety. Representatives of these ministries attend only the General Assemblies; they do not have a permanent seat in the working groups where information is provided and decisions are made about particular food safety issues. Only rarely, when the working groups' agendas contain issues of special interest to the country, do they attend these sessions—for example, their participation in the Codex Committee on Processed Fruits and Vegetables to propose standards in this area.

54. The country participates in the round tables of the groups established by the WTO forum on sanitary measures, standards, and techniques, through its accredited diplomats in Geneva. Furthermore, regarding Codex Alimentarius, institutions working in matters on its specific agenda sit on the National Codex Committee, assisting the advisory committees coordinated by the MEIC's National Office of Standards and Measures (ONNUM). As a member of the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) and the World Animal Health Organization (OIE), Costa Rica participates in Codex assemblies through the Bureau of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Protection. These two bodies, in turn, are responsible for studying the technical documents sent to them for consultation.

55. Costa Rica must have a greater presence in all types of discussion- and decision-making forums in the area of food safety. Economic constraints prevent the technical teams from the country's pertinent institutions from traveling to these events to present Costa Rica's position, negotiate, and attempt to influence decision-making. Support from the international organizations is needed to obtain the necessary financing.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Obtain local resources and technical and financial assistance to design and implement a national food safety project, one of whose main components would be to address the deficiencies and needs indicated by the institutions in this sector.
- This project would be responsible for designing the policy framework and sectoral strategies, and it would include its own National Plan of Action with operational goals—all of it conceived and organized in an integrated fashion. The design would stress the mobilization of political will to promote food safety and procurement of the technical and financial cooperation required to give it the necessary sustainability for its ongoing execution. The project would also include mechanisms to monitor, follow-up, and evaluate its various activities.
- Its most important thematic areas are:
 - strengthening public and private institutions with food safety functions;

- updating and harmonizing the existing legislation, both local and regional;
- defining and setting up more and better sectoral and multisectoral coordination mechanisms;
- establishing a food safety commission at the highest level;
- procuring private sector involvement in policy-making and strategy development, as well as program and project execution;
- designing and conducting public awareness campaigns; training human resources;
- creating a food safety surveillance system, together with an information system that efficiently provides users with the timely and very reliable information they need to inform decision-making and strategic and integrated planning.

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