

Enhancing SPS coordination at the country level

Improving food safety, animal and plant health capacity to promote trade, or meet other domestic policy objectives, depends on the combined efforts of a number of different public and private stakeholders. Experience shows that these objectives are facilitated when domestic stakeholders meet regularly to discuss sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) issues.

This briefing note summarizes the recommendations and lessons learned from the STDF paper “National SPS Coordination Mechanisms: An African Perspective”. It indicates that strengthening coordination among relevant government institutions at the national and sub-national level, and with the private sector, reduces information gaps, promotes synergies in the implementation of SPS measures and enhances the effectiveness of available resources. Ultimately, this improves countries’ implementation of the SPS Agreement and participation in the international standard-setting bodies.

What kinds of national SPS mechanisms exist, and how well do they work?

Research carried out by the STDF in 2010, including a survey targeted at countries in Africa, indicates that SPS coordination mechanisms (usually known as national SPS committees) come in a range of different sizes, shades and colours. Some work better than others. Some don't really function at all. Only one respondent to the survey (South Africa) rated its SPS coordination mechanism as satisfactory.

Feedback from the survey links the limited success of national SPS committees to unclear mandates, out-dated legislation, limited SPS awareness, inadequate resources and/or difficulties in involving the private sector. Although resource limitations can be a challenge, with clear political commitment and buy-in from the key SPS stakeholders, a lot can be achieved with relatively limited resources.

While most national SPS committees focus on food safety, animal and plant health, some address broader issues such as agricultural development, export promotion or specific products. In some cases, Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) and private voluntary standards are also covered. Typical roles include raising awareness on SPS issues, exchanging information, coordinating SPS technical cooperation or country positions, providing advice on SPS policy and strategy

development, and/or discussing WTO notifications.

Membership varies depending on the context. In addition to the various government agencies involved in SPS activities (including SPS and TBT enquiry points, and Codex, IPPC and OIE contact points), representatives of producer associations, exporters, chambers of commerce and/or individual companies are also sometimes included. While some committees are officially recognized in national legislation, in other cases informal committees, without any official endorsement, operate effectively. National SPS committees meet on either a regular or ad-hoc basis. Regular committees seem better positioned to take strategic decisions, compared to ad-hoc committees which tend to be more reactive to emergencies and less strategically oriented.

Tips to enhance SPS coordination at the country level

Ensure high-level government buy-in.

Commitment of senior politicians and government officials is generally a prerequisite to achieve an enabling environment for national SPS committees to become established and flourish. This may require raising awareness on the importance of SPS issues and the potential impact that SPS measures can have on international trade and the wider economy. Raising high-level awareness about the importance of national

Key messages

- **WTO Members’ experiences indicate that countries with some sort of operational SPS coordination mechanism fare better in managing SPS issues.**
- **National SPS committees provide a useful vehicle to encourage public-private dialogue on SPS issues.**
- **The inclusion of the private sector is important as they are the ones directly exposed to SPS compliance issues through trade.**
- **Effective national SPS committees have clear objectives and terms of reference, and good meeting practices.**
- **Available evidence shows that there is substantial scope to improve SPS coordination at the country and regional levels.**
- **Some human and financial resources are needed to operate and manage national SPS committees. However, commitment and a willingness to engage is often more important.**
- **Effective SPS coordination at the country level is likely to support SPS coherence at the regional level, and should be encouraged.**

SPS committees can also help such committees to become officially recognized. Yet, while this may be preferable, it may take several years to achieve.

Clarify SPS mandates and roles. Clarity and consensus on organizational roles and responsibilities is important for the effective operation of SPS coordination mechanisms. In some cases, this may require a review of legislation. Identifying a suitable institutional home for the secretariat of the national SPS committee is also important.

Build on existing mechanisms. In many countries, various working groups, task forces and other committees already address issues related to food safety (such as National Codex Committees), animal or plant health, or specific export commodities. New national SPS committees need not be created where existing mechanisms could take on this role effectively. Making use of existing mechanisms can save resources and time.

Think creatively. There are no hard and fast rules on how to organize and operate national SPS committees. Efforts should be made to engage all the concerned public and private sector stakeholders, and enable them to reach consensus on what type of structure will work for them. While some may decide to establish sub-committees, others may not. An alternative is to organize national SPS committee meetings with “break-out” sessions of the different Codex, IPPC and OIE national bodies. Meetings should take place as often as considered useful. One option is for the national SPS committee to meet at least three times per year, in preparation for and as a follow up to, meetings of the WTO SPS Committee in Geneva.

Agree on and identify the resources needed. Some minor costs may be involved in establishing and running national SPS committees (e.g. to maintain a secretariat or website, provide coffee at meetings, or cover travel expenses for officials from outside capital). Human resources – including time to prepare for and follow-up to meetings – are equally important. While donors may sometimes provide assistance to “get things started”, expenses related to SPS coordination should ideally be covered by national government budgets to enhance sustainability.

Improve communication. Increased attention and resources should be targeted at enhancing communication and information exchange. Various tools can be used. The development of networks and web-based tools can promote the flow of SPS information, not only among relevant government agencies, but also with the private sector.

Actively encourage sustainability. Experiences indicate that it is relatively straightforward to establish national SPS committees. The real challenge is to make these committees effective and operational, and ensure their sustainability over the medium to long-term (see box). Inactive committees that exist only on paper should be avoided. Formalization of institutional arrangements for national SPS committees may enhance their long-term success and sustainability.

Promote regional SPS coherence. Effective SPS coordination at the country level is likely to support SPS coherence at the regional level. Mechanisms to improve regional SPS coordination are important and should be encouraged. More attention needs to be given on how to best achieve this in view of resource limitations and overlapping membership in Regional Economic Communities (RECs) in Africa.

Key factors to enhance sustainability of national SPS committees

- **Seek ownership and commitment from the private sector.**
- **Implement a practical and workable design and structure, based on trust, transparency and clear terms of reference.**
- **Encourage members to actively share information as an integral part of their regular work (as opposed to a voluntary or additional task).**
- **Select a capable chairperson and identify an effective secretariat or person to ensure adequate and timely preparation of, and follow-up to, meetings.**
- **Perform periodic reviews to assess performance and make changes, as required.**

Further information

- To download the STDF publication “National SPS Coordination Mechanisms: An African Perspective”, please visit: <http://www.standardsfacility.org/en/ROthers.htm>