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> Agricultural Health and Food Safety: Some COVID-19 Reflections

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# Agricultural Health and Food Safety: Some COVID-19 Reflections

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## Colaboradores

Gretchen Stanton (/taxonomy/term/28)

This pandemic will make it more challenging for current and planned agricultural health and food safety programs to proceed – while making the need for these all the more apparent. The need to practice social distancing, the health risks to those working in the agriculture, processing, marketing and distribution sectors, the disruption of government services and of training activities are likely to lead to significant delays in the implementation of current and planned programs. While technological tools

allow for virtual meetings and on-line training sessions, it will take some time for many stakeholders to adapt to this way of doing business – and not all will be able to adapt. The difficulties can be expected to be greatest for the smaller producers/sellers of agricultural products, and the lack of a reliable stream of income may force many of these to cease commercial production altogether.

At the same time, consumers and other stakeholders are becoming much more aware of the importance of ensuring the safety of all products, but particularly of food products. The pandemic has “opened the eyes” of many consumers to potential health risks and will likely lead to an increased demand for higher and “guaranteed” safety of foods. To meet this demand, there will be a need for increased training and guidance programmes, and given the current environment, these will need to be virtual and online at the initial stages.

One of the challenges for those in the SPS (sanitary and phytosanitary) field is that if they are successfully doing their work and are able to minimize SPS risks, it is difficult to get the political attention necessary to ensure adequate funding and other resources. It is only when there is a publicity-grabbing problem that politicians seem to understand the importance of SPS capacity and controls. Although this pandemic is not an SPS problem, it may perversely give officials an advantage in arguing the need for more SPS capacity-building, serving as an excellent example of how difficult control can be if the public/agricultural health infrastructure is not robust.

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Unfortunately, governments around the world are not coordinating their responses to COVID-19, and different measures (<https://blog.iica.int/blog/medidas-politica-acciones-del-sector-agroalimentario-frente-al-covid-19>) are being taken in different places. Social distancing is perhaps the most widespread of measures, with many governments requiring all but essential services to be closed. (What is defined as “essential” varies widely, however.) This has resulted in the closing of all restaurants and bars to all but carry-out services, the closing of stores except those selling food, pharmaceuticals and other “essential” items. Many governments have instituted “shelter in place” requirements, closing

schools, businesses (except for those working virtually from home), reducing public transportation availability, etc. In some places, people are still permitted to move outdoors freely – while respecting a 2 meter distance for others – some countries have put stricter limits on such outdoor activities (e.g., no more than 1 hour/day; only within close proximity of the residence; closing popular outdoor locations such as beaches, parks, etc.). All non-urgent medical procedures and appointments have been cancelled, in an effort to both slow the spread of the virus and also to free up more medical personnel to deal with the COVID-19 patients.

All of these actions clearly have a significant impact on the agricultural sector, including the harvesting, processing and transportation of goods. While the production and distribution of food is considered as an essential activity, many of those working in this sector are unable to continue to do so because of risks to their health, the need to care for children because schools are closed, the lack of public transportation or other difficulties arising from the general restrictions.

**Imagination, innovation and flexibility are all critical** for decision makers and Agro actors to not only survive this pandemic, but hopefully to use this as a way to make future improvements. The need to do more with less at this time may lead to streamlining of production/processing/transportation that will have long-lasting benefits for the sector. The need to make greater use of new technologies and tools for communication, business and education can also lead to important post-COVID 19 improvements and new, more efficient, business models. And as noted above, such an emergency offers the opportunity to make the case for enhanced SPS capacity to avoid future problems.

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For decision makers in particular, there is a pressing need to find ways to provide the necessary financial assistance to the agro sector (as some countries are already doing (<https://blog.iica.int/blog/medidas-politica-acciones-del-sector-agroalimentario-frente-al-covid-19>)) to ensure that it can continue to produce / process / and distribute critical foodstuffs during this pandemic. This may take the form of special loans or grants, of debt forgiveness, of redirecting currently unused resources to assist with food distribution.