

VIRTUAL WTO AGRICULTURE SYMPOSIUM 2020 - AGRICULTURAL TRADE AND FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

"Big Take-Aways – Session Five - AGRICULTURAL TRADE, FOOD SAFETY"

- Speakers highlighted the flexibilities afforded to WTO Members in the WTO SPS Agreement in developing and implementing SPS measures, based on science and risk assessment. The Agreement encourages food safety measures to be based on international standards set by Codex Alimentarius ("harmonization"). Codex faces three challenges: (i) a lack of sustainable funding for scientific advice; (ii) uncertainty related to the continuous evolution of science, and the need for transparency in this regard; and (iii) a need for Codex to be open to insights from other scientific communities.
 - The session highlighted the importance of meeting international standards and other food safety requirements to facilitate safe trade and protect public health, including domestically. In the longer-term, SPS compliance leads to sustainable economic growth, food security and improved livelihoods, contributing to the SDGs. The work of the Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF) was viewed as important in this regard.
 - Implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) will be critical in enhancing trade in food and agriculture products in Africa. Challenges include infrastructure deficits, limited production, overcoming numerous non-tariff barriers, lack of diagnostic capacity and limited regional harmonization of SPS measures. The African Union has adopted an SPS Policy Framework for Africa to address these challenges. It is also developing a new food safety strategy for Africa, as well as setting up a new pan-African food safety agency.
 - Some speakers noted that meeting international standards can be difficult for African exporters, especially in societies that use more traditional farming methods. A key topic of discussion was the emergence of new approaches towards food safety regulation, including co-regulatory approaches and other forms of public-private partnerships. Speakers noted that prevention, protection, consumer awareness and public-private partnerships are integral parts of national food control systems.
 - Speakers emphasised that COVID-19 is not a food safety problem but noted the lasting effects on workers and the pandemic's economic impact. As a result of the pandemic, many companies are now stricter in implementing basic hygiene procedures, which is having a positive impact on food safety. The pandemic also accelerated the use of new technologies, such as remote food inspection and audit tools, and electronic certification. In Codex, the development of new guidance on electronic certification is currently underway.
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