



Speaker Summary Note

Session: Addressing Agriculture-Associated Diseases

Kabba Joiner

Speaker: Former Director
West African Health Organization (WAHO), Burkina Faso

Title: The Dilemma of the Policy Makers in a Resource Challenged Environment

In recent years, scientific and technological developments in the agricultural sector, have resulted in increase food and livestock production and at the same time to certain public health concerns—improper harvest technology resulting in agric commodities being contaminated; application of various agrochemicals (pesticides, fungicides, antibiotics); food pathogens entering the food chain(both traditional and organic agriculture); genetically modified foods and occupational hazards (workplace safety and health). These present challenges to policy makers, especially in a resource challenged environment. Use of various integrated food management systems are now being emphasized, to minimize the dangers posed to human health from improper agricultural practices.

Everyday, policy makers are faced with challenges that need to be addressed. Pressure on their time is intense, so they need to determine quickly which issues should get their attention. Policy makers (elected/appointed officials/staffs) rely on advisers (persons in and outside government, interest groups, experts, consultants, academics, civil society) to help them make and implement decisions. Policy makers tend to **rely on advisers with certain characteristics, to help them** sort through the myriad of information they receive. These characteristics include:

- Status of the individual: Influential interest groups; religious, political, business and labor leaders; researchers, academics
- Knowledgeable individuals on local political and logistics issues
- Persons knowledgeable about the current subject matter under consideration
- Dependable and trustworthy individuals
- Representatives of interest groups who straightforwardly tell the policy maker what they want and need.

Factors affecting positively the policy makers' key decision making process include:

- Policy briefs that are thought through, with appropriate rationale
- Issues that are framed, taking into consideration political, logistical, financial and sectional interests

- Interacting with the policy maker at the earliest possible stage in the decision making process.
- Presentation—policy alternatives, supporting data and materials presented short and simple, that can be easily translated into information the policy maker can use.
- Developing a long-term trust relationship with certain individuals that the policy maker can rely on for advice, counsel and support.

The policy maker determines what issues should get their attention by asking such questions as:

- Is the policy maker the sole sponsor of the policy and what should it include?
- Is the policy maker a co-sponsor of a policy developed by colleagues?
- Which conferences (national, regional, international); joint committees or working groups should the policy maker participate, in order to be knowledgeable on the relevant issues?
- What difference will the policy maker’s decision make – hurt, help or have little effect?
- Can an inter-sectoral consensus be achieved on the issue?

With agricultural associated diseases, **policy makers in developing countries face challenges such as:**

- Lack of appropriate experts to advise them in the area of concern
- Implementation inadequacies: Budgetary and planning; local capacity to implement policies with resultant dependence on donor technical aid; weak health systems; low per capita expenditure on health;
- Donor fatigue and donor agenda setting
- Prescriptive directives from international bodies without reference to local conditions
- WTO, Intellectual Property Rights, Patent Regulations and other international conventions countries have signed on to.
- Political, sectional, religious and family pressures
- Gender inequality
- Inadequate leadership role of local officials
- Poverty and Corruption
- High illiteracy rates leading to “Elite Capture” and “Elite Control”
- Majority of farms are owned and managed by small farmers

The Health Impact Assessment (HIA) developed by WHO, can be a reliable tool in assisting decision makers. HIA can be used for development of policy at local, regional and international level. With the pressures posed on the health system by the agriculture associated diseases, policy makers need to adopt new approaches, most importantly more action and less rhetoric.