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**Experiences of the Slovak Republic in the FAO Project
TCP/SLO/8921(A) “Strengthening Food Quality Control”**

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This FAO Technical Cooperation Project was completed in June 2001. It enabled the Slovak Republic to create a new concept of food legislation and administration linked to the European Union and Codex Alimentarius.

The main activities of the Project were oriented in the following areas:

1. Food legislation

Current legal status of food quality management was overviewed and recommendations were made to improve legislation on food quality control and food inspection. Since Slovakia is an associated country of the European Union, and it is obliged to incorporate *Acquis Communautaire* (Directives and regulations of the European Community, which contain also requirements for foodstuffs), the recommendations were made with respect to this fact.

As a result of this activity the Food Act Nr. 152/1995 was adjusted and approved in December 2001. Some important new elements were included, such as preparing the Rapid Alert System, to point out consumer protection as the main concern of the State. Requirements on registration of food production and other ones were improved in links with EU criteria. A new concept of food inspection was enforced; pre-market and market inspection was clearly separated.

More transparency was brought into food import and export requirements – all imported and exported food should meet the requirements of the Food Act. New aspects to be enforced related to food labelling were answered such as a problematic issue of including the prescribed date of

consumption. Regarding the 258/97 EEC Regulation the adjusted version of the Act defines the "novel food" which was not being used before.

Respecting the new principle "from stable to table", a whole range of provisions relates to food inspection. This area has become fully compatible with the 89/397/EEC Directive on official food control at all stages, including the entire food chain - food production process, food trade and catering as well as consumer protection regarding fair trade practices.

The new concept of official food control is linked very well to experience with the Aimed Food Chain Monitoring System, which has been run in the Slovak Republic since 1991. Used data on the handling and processing methods have served as a tool of risk analysis and they will be utilised also in accordance with the new food control concept.

The paragraphs on organisation of food inspection bodies met with considerable changes. Responsibilities of the individual inspection bodies are specified in more detail and fields of the individual bodies have been defined very clearly. Only accredited laboratories may provide inspection testing.

Following the EU Food Act concept of the European Food Authority, two Slovak authorities (the Slovak Agriculture and Food Inspection and the State Veterinary Administration) joined together creating the State Food and Veterinary Administration. This body will undertake roles at the national level similar to the ones of the European Food Authority.

The adjusted version of the Food Act entered into force in January 2002. It covers all aspects of food quality management and brings transparency into the process. (Some previous decrees were cancelled.) Linking to the new Food Act version, the individual chapters of the Slovak Food Codex are being verified and adjusted gradually. The process is to be finalised by the end of this year.

2. Food Inspection

The Project showed a need to exclude overlaps in activities of the actual food control bodies. Regarding the new views of the Food Act, food inspection restructuring took place in January 2002.

A training course on "Food Inspection" for representatives of the food inspection bodies was held in May 2001 to stress the modern concept. General Principles on Food Hygiene, as a prerequisite to HACCP certification and needs of validation and verification of HACCP systems, were discussed in detail. Elaboration of HACCP generic schemes to address the individual types of food production plants was suggested. The generic schemes should be available to producers gratis.

Unified basic rules of food inspection were specified and described in the Food Inspection Manual, which was distributed to the individual inspection units. A set of inspection equipment was defined and purchased as a model for the next education activities.

The Food Inspection Manual offers guidelines on interpretation of the General Principles of Food Hygiene that have been made available to all inspectors. These guidelines are based on the

FAO training manual on food hygiene and the Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) system.

The use of a common reporting system for all food inspection agencies has been recommended. The core of the model report is based on the Codex Alimentarius General Principle on Food Hygiene. A second part of the reporting system should be based on Good Manufacturing Practices and standards specific to each type of food.

3. Food Laboratory Management

Following detailed discussions of the FAO consultant and national experts, a 5-day workshop, "Analytical methods for food control", was organised in December 2000. Participants from individual food control authorities were invited. Thanks to the contribution of a top international expert, method validation as the key parameter of the application of new analytical methods could be discussed in real detail. A whole range of professional documents related to the Codex requirements on new food analytical methods was distributed among the participants to accelerate the unified implementation of the presented knowledge, which was aimed especially at validation reports.

At the end of the workshop, the participants adopted some recommendations to improve the laboratory management system in the food control area including acceptance of Codex Alimentarius criteria as defined for laboratories intended for food export and import control.

A special analysis was aimed at the laboratory equipment of food control bodies regarding the roles of the laboratories. This analysis led to the purchase of some basic food control equipment.

Following the recommendations of the Project workshop, Codex criteria were summarised and compared with the actual situations in the Slovak Republic. The report was drafted by the Secretariat of the Slovak Food Codex Committee and distributed to food control laboratories for application (December 2001).

All activities in the three above-mentioned areas were underpinned with a one-week Study Tour by 8 Slovak food experts to Denmark, organized by the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration. Finalising the Project, a workshop aimed at the WTO SPS and TBT Agreements was held (May 2001) to explain related issues to participants from Ministries, food production associations and representatives of consumers groups.

Conclusions

Results of the Project contributed to strengthening food quality control in the Slovak Republic. The impact of the Project was enhanced by the efficient collaboration among FAO consultants and Slovak experts as well as by the good working relation between the SR Ministry of Agriculture and the FAO Sub-regional Office for Central and Eastern Europe in Budapest.

At the final meeting to the Project it was suggested to utilise the Project as a model for other Central and East European countries. It was also recommended that the Slovak Republic be mandated to complete the training of inspectors of the CEE countries in the HACCP system. To ensure uniformity of the interpretation of the food inspection results, consideration should be given to train all inspectors on food hygiene by using the same FAO Training Manual on Food

Hygiene and the HACCP system as a common training standard. Based on the experiences of the FAO Project, such training courses should consider also HACCP validation, rapid microbiological methods involving PCR, GMO food testing, validation of analytical methods, and interpretation of analytical results.