



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
ORGANIZATION
OF THE UNITED NATIONS



WORLD
HEALTH
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FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for Africa

Summary Report of the Briefing Meeting
Rome, 27 January 2005

1. Opening of the meeting

A briefing meeting for the FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for Africa was held in Rome, on the occasion of the 16th Session of the FAO/WHO Coordinating Committee for Africa, on 27 January 2005. The meeting was attended by 83 participants; representing 32 countries of the African region (see List of Participants in Annex 1). Mr Hartwig de Haen, Assistant Director-General, Economic and Social Department, FAO, welcomed the delegates on behalf of FAO and WHO. He recalled the previous discussions held regarding this conference and the relevant decisions made by the Directors-General of FAO and WHO. The participants were reminded that the meeting was being held to update the representatives of the region regarding the status of preparations for the conference and to seek the views and recommendations of the delegates regarding the content, practical organization and budget of the conference. The meeting was chaired by Mr Kraissid Tontisirin, Director of the FAO Food and Nutrition Division.

2. Update on preparations for the Conference

Mr Ezzeddine Boutrif, FAO secretariat for the conference, presented the background, objectives, provisional agenda and timetable of the conference, as included in the meeting working document made available to all participants. Delegates provided valuable feedback and suggested other important issues of concern to the region, as reflected in the revised conference objectives and themes (Annex 2). These changes will also be reflected in the agenda and programme of the conference. The meeting reiterated that, as discussed at the previous briefing meeting held in June 2004, the conference should not only present an analysis of the current food safety situation in Africa, but that it should also discuss practical and specific solutions to the real problems and concerns of the region. The importance of the sustainability of communication and improvement in food safety after the conclusion of the conference was also emphasized.

Delegates raised many points of interest which were already reflected in the themes of the conference, but which should be explicitly included in the conference papers. Some delegations proposed alternate or additional themes for the conference, including "Food Safety: our responsibility in the global market" and "Food Safety for better health for all." Delegates also mentioned the importance of addressing issues such as traceability, GMOs, emerging pathogens, the ethics of the safety and quality of donated food and the relationship between HIV/AIDS and food safety. The meeting noted that rather than dealing with the implementation of Codex standards in an in-depth manner at the conference, countries should cover this item in their national situation analysis for input to paper A and that the Codex regional coordinating committee meetings could deal with the issue in greater detail. The meeting agreed to maintain the five main conference themes as initially presented as these were agreed upon by previous preparatory meetings. It agreed that restricting the scope of the themes would (1) keep the meeting more focused, (2) allow more time for discussion and analysis on the current themes and (3)

facilitate the development of a regional action plan for food safety. The meeting agreed to incorporate emerging issues of concern into existing themes and retain additionally suggested themes for future use.

The meeting noted that the FAO/WHO secretariat could initiate the preparation of a draft regional strategy and action plan for food safety, including a timetable for actions, which would be further discussed by the working groups of the conference. This plan could be used as the basis for the development of proposals for a regional programme to improve food safety, which could be endorsed by the conference and then presented to donors for funding. The action plan would be complementary to the action plan for the Codex Coordinating Committee for Africa currently under active deliberation.

Delegates were encouraged to prepare Conference Room Documents on the specific subjects mentioned, as well as other subjects related to food safety which were of interest to the countries of the region. The meeting considered that side events could be held on these issues of specific concern.

Delegates emphasized the need for the conference to assist in raising the profile of food safety at the national level and increasing political will to improve food safety. As such, the secretariat noted that the conference was intended for senior food safety regulators, the highest level of officials within the government that are in charge of food safety. It was also emphasized that national delegations should be composed of at least one representative from the health sector and at least one from agriculture/ trade.

The meeting noted that the working groups would report back to the plenary session after their parallel sessions, which will be corrected in the provisional timetable.

The secretariat announced that FAO and WHO and the Government of Zimbabwe have tentatively agreed to hold the conference from 3 to 6 October 2005, contingent upon final approval from the host government. The meeting also noted that the conference will be held in English and in French, which are the official languages of FAO for the region.

3. Status of the discussion papers for the Conference

The secretariat noted that the main themes, sub-points, and lead authors for each paper, as indicated in Annex 3 of the working document, had been agreed by the previous briefing meeting (June 2004).

Theme A: National food safety systems in Africa - a situation analysis

The meeting noted that this theme required input from member countries, and that FAO/WHO would send out a circular letter, requesting national governments to submit national situation papers to the FAO/WHO secretariat by 31 March 2005. The FAO/WHO secretariat indicated that it would also take into account country papers presented at the FAO/WHO Workshop on Food Control Systems (24 January 2005), the 16th Session of CCAFRICA, as well as at GF-1 and GF-2 in the synthesis of this information.

Theme B: Prioritization and coordination of capacity building activities

The meeting discussed that in order to foster regional ownership of the working documents, the countries of the region which had originally agreed to prepare these documents would be the lead author for the indicated paper, but that FAO and WHO would provide

information, including that from other countries of the region, as well as other assistance and direction to the authors. It was discussed that the documents should provide a summary of the situation, including points for discussion during the Conference.

Theme C: Informal food distribution sector (street foods and foods sold in schools): importance and challenges

The meeting noted that the delegation of Zimbabwe had already established a team to prepare this paper and that information should also be obtained from IFPRI and from the Association of City Mayors in Africa. Delegates were invited to submit information related to this topic to the FAO Sub-regional office for Southern and Eastern Africa, who would relay it to the authors.

Theme D: Assuring Food Safety and Quality in Small and Medium-size Food Enterprises

The delegation of Botswana agreed to prepare this paper, with input from the FAO/WHO secretariat and from ICGMA. It was agreed to include artisanal food production and the socio-economic aspects of SMEs in the paper as well.

Theme E: International, regional, sub-regional and national cooperation in food safety

It was noted that this paper will be prepared by the FAO/WHO regional offices. The FAO/WHO secretariat indicated that it would formally contact the author countries to request the first draft of these working papers (approximately 5000 words) by 30 May 2005.

Working group discussions

The meeting noted that the two parallel working groups (WG) will report back to the plenary session. The WG discussions will be based on information presented in the discussion papers. The two themes proposed for the working groups include:

- 1) Development of a regional strategic plan for food safety, along with the actions necessary to improve food safety in the region;
- 2) Sustainable regional/sub-regional networks for information exchange and cooperation in food safety in the region.

4. Proposals for side events during the Conference

The secretariat indicated that the side events are intended to cover topics separate from the main themes of the conference. As previously indicated, emerging issues of concern could be the subject of side events for the conference. In addition, it was mentioned that subjects such as the implementation of HACCP in SMEs, the experience of the fisheries sector in food safety, etc. could be interesting for the delegates.

The representative of Consumers International indicated that they were interested in presenting a side event, probably on the issue of GMO safety, and would confirm in due course. It was discussed that the side events could occur during lunch breaks and immediately after the sessions, so that the report writing day could potentially be free for field trips, tours of factories, research institutions, or touristic attractions.

The Secretariat will include a call for interested organizations to propose the complete organization of side events on food safety related topics on the conference website. The details of

the side event topics will be finalized between the FAO/WHO secretariat and the host government in due course.

5. Establishment of national task forces for Conference preparation

The meeting noted the importance of including those delegates that attended GF-1 and GF-2 in the national preparations for the Conference, so that national efforts can be better coordinated. The FAO/WHO secretariat indicated that it would correspond with the FAO (and WHO) representatives in the region to request them to contact the national governments to establish national task forces for conference preparation as proposed in Annex 4 of the meeting working document.

6. Status of funding for the Conference

Delegates at the meeting emphasized the importance of ensuring maximum participation at the conference, including delegates from all countries of the region (not only those countries defined as Least Developed), and participants from both the health and agriculture sectors. Delegates indicated that they must know as soon as possible if support would be available for their attendance and what the total cost of participation would be for each country.

The FAO and WHO secretariat indicated that it had recently sent out letters to donors, requesting support for the conference, but that no response had been received to date. The secretariat also noted that national governments should directly request support from donors which are represented in their capitals.

The representative from Consumers International requested that countries consider including consumer representatives in their national delegations. The representative also requested financial support from FAO/WHO to attend the conference.

7. Other matters

Opening of the Conference: The meeting noted that the FAO/WHO secretariat would determine the conference bureau (chair, vice chairs, rapporteur, working group chairs and rapporteurs) according to standard FAO procedures and would contact delegates accordingly.

Keynote speaker: The secretariat is considering potential keynote speakers who would attract the attention of the media and the general public and will accept suggestions accordingly.

The secretariat will work with the host country to finalize other logistical details for the conference.

The meeting noted that the details of the follow-up to the conference should be worked out at the conference itself. The secretariat will continue to monitor the progress of the follow-up through the FAO/WHO regional governing bodies and other appropriate venues.

The meeting was closed at 17:30 hours on 27 January 2005.



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Annex I

FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for Africa

Briefing Meeting, Red Room, FAO Headquarters

14:30 hours, Thursday 27 January 2005

LIST OF PARTICIPANTS LISTE DES PARTICIPANTS

ANGOLA

M. Mario Antonio ERNESTO
Técnico do Secretariado Executivo do Codex -
Angola
Eng. Agronomo
Ministerio da Agricultura e do Desenvolvimento
Rural
DNAF Rua Comandante Gika, C.P. 527
Luanda

BENIN - BÉNIN

M. Ahoupko Denis MIKODE
Directeur
Direction de l'Alimentation et de la Nutrition
Appliquée (DANA)
Ministère de l'Agriculture, de l'Élevage et de la
Pêche
Boîte postale 295 Porto-Novo
Cotonou
Phone: +229 21 2670
Fax: + 229 21 3963
Email: danamdr@leland.bj/admikode@yahoo.fr

BOTSWANA

Mr Hussein Hassan Tattue TARIMO
Principal Scientific Officer
Head Food Control Unit
Community Health Services Division
Ministry of Health
Private Bag 00269 Gaborone
Phone: + 267 3974351
Fax: +267 3974354
Email: nfcgabs@global.bw

CAMEROON - CAMEROUN

Mr Medi MOUNGUI
Deputy Permanent Representative to FAO
Embassy of the Republic of Cameroon
Via Siracusa 4-6
00161 Rome
Phone: + 39 06 4403644
Fax: + 39 06 4403644
Email: medi.moungui@virgilio.it/
medimoungui@yahoo.it

CAPE VERDE - CAP-VERT

M. David Do Rosário MONTEIRO
Médico Veterinario
Ministère de l'environnement, agriculture et pêches
Rue Antonio Pussich
C.P. 115 Praia
Phone: +00 238 261 5716
Fax: +00 238 2614054
Email: admonteiro@cvtelecom.cv

CHAD - TCHAD

M. Mahamat OUMAR ZIBER
Chef de la Division de l'Hygiène des Denrées
Alimentaires
Ministère de l'Élevage
Direction des services vétérinaires
B.P. 750
N'Djaména
Phone: + 235 523617
Fax: + 235 518850
Email: fao-tcd@field.fao.org

CONGO

M. Pépin BOUNGOU
Service Contrôle de Qualité des Produits agricoles
Ministère de l'agriculture, de l'élevage et de la pêche
B.P. 2453
Brazzaville

M. Emile ESSEMA
Deuxième Conseiller
Représentant permanent adjoint auprès de la FAO
Ambassade de la République du Congo
Via Ombrone, 8/10
00198 Rome
Phone: 39 06 841 7422
Email: Ambacorome@libero.it

ERITREA

Mr Yohannes TENSUE
First Secretary
Alternate Permanent Representative to FAO
Embassy of Eritrea
Via Boncompagni, 16 - 3rd Floor
00187 Rome

ETHIOPIA - ÉTHIOPIE

H.E. Mengistu HULLUKA
Ambassador/Permanent Representative to FAO
Embassy of the Federal Democratic Republic
of Ethiopia
(Office of the Permanent Representative to FAO)
Via Andrea Vesalia 16
00161 Rome

GABON

M. Louis Stanislas CHARICAUTH
Conseiller
Représentant permanent suppléant auprès de la FAO
Ambassade de la République gabonaise
Via San Marino, 36-36A
Rome 00198
Phone: + 06 85358970
Fax: +06 8417278
Email: lscharicauth@hotmail.com

GHANA

Mr Kwaku Owusu BAAH
Chief Director and Chairman National Codex
Committee
Ministry of Food and Agriculture
P.O. Box M37
Accra
Phone: +233 21 666567
Fax: +233 21 668245
Email: kwakuobaah@yahoo.com

Mr Lawrence E. YANKEY
Executive Director
Ghana Standards Board
P.O. Box MB-245
Accra
Phone: +233 21 501495
Fax: +233 21 500231/500092
Email: leyankey@yahoo.com

Mrs Kristina BIRITWUM
Director
Chemical Sciences Division
Ghana Standards Board
P.O. Box MB-245
Accra
Phone: +233 21 501492
Fax: + 233 21 500231
Email: kristinab@yahoo.com

Miss Genevieve BAAH
Scientific Officer
Codex Secretariat
Ghana Standards Board
P.O. Box MB-245
Accra
Phone: +233 244 662735
Fax: + 233 021 500092
Email: gsbnep@ghanastandards.org

Mr George Ekow HAFORD
Corporate Quality/Regulatory Affairs Manager
CWAR
Nestle Ghana Limited
Accra

Mr Kwamina VAN-ESS
Head
Food Division
Food and Drugs Board
P.O. Box CT 2783
Cantoments
Accra
Phone: +233 21 661248/673090
Fax: +233 21 660389
Email: kwaminav@yahoo.com/fdb@ghana.com

Mr Kwaku NICOL
Minister Counsellor
Alternate Permanent Representative to FAO
Embassy of the Republic of Ghana
Via Ostriana 4
00199 Rome
Phone: +06 86219307
Fax: + 06 86325762
Email: ghfaorom@rdn.it

Mr Peter Maxwell BINEY
Plant Protection and Regulatory Services Directorate
Ministry of Food and Agriculture
P.O. Box M 37
Accra
Phone: + 020 8161608
Fax: +00233 21668245
Email: pmbiney@yahoo.com

Dr Joseph MUSAA
Deputy Director Veterinary Services
Ministry of Livestock and Fisheries
Private Bag
Kabete - Nairobi
Phone: +254 020 631390
Fax: +254 020 631273
Email: vetdep@todaysonline.com

GUINEA - GUINÉE

Mme Cisse Hadja MINTÉ
Directrice
Institut National de Normalisation et de Métrologie
Ministère de l'Industrie, du Commerce des petites et
moyennes entreprises
Conakry B.P. 195
Phone: +224 299539
Fax: +224 43 1295
Email: minte.cisse@caramail.com

LESOTHO

Mrs Mamosala Semakaleng SHALE
First Secretary
Alternate Permanent Representative to FAO
Embassy of the Kingdom of Lesotho
Via Serchio, 8
Rome 00198
Phone: +06 8542496
Fax: +06 8542527
Email: lesothoembassy@tin.it

GUINEA-BISSAU

M. Ca RUI
Chef
Dirección de alimentación et l'eau
Laboratoire de la Santé Publique
Ministère de la Santé Publique
B.P. n° 50
Bissau
Phone: +245 20 44 38
Fax: +245 252404
Email: ruicas2003@yahoo.com.br

Mr Cyprian MOKHORO
Chief Standards Officer
Ministry of Trade and Industry, Cooperatives and
Marketing
LNDC Complex
Kingsway
PO Box 747 Maseru 100
Phone: + 266 22 320695/17454
Fax: +266 22 310326
Email: lessqa@leo.co.ls

MADAGASCAR

S.E. Monsieur Auguste Richard Paraina
Ambassadeur
Représentant permanent auprès de la FAO
Ambassade de la République de Madagascar
Via Riccardo Zandonai, 84/A
00194 Rome

KENYA

Mrs Evah ODUOR
General Manager
Standards Development Division
Kenya Bureau of Standards, KEBS Centre
Kapiti Road, Off Mombasa Road Behind Bellevue
Cinema
P.O. Box 54974
Nairobi 00200
Phone: +254 20 6092 8000 or 609661/2
Fax: +254 20 609660 or 503293
Email: oduore@kebs.org

Mrs Margaret ALEKE
Head of Department Service Standards
Kenya Bureau of Standards
P.O. Box 54974-00200
Nairobi
Phone: +254 020 605490
Fax: +254 020 609660
Email: Alekem@kebs.org

MALI

Mr M. TOURE
Représentant Permanent suppléant du Mali
auprès la FAO
Ambassade du Mali
Via Antonio Bosio 2,
00101 Rome
Phone: +39 06 4425 4068
Fax: +39 06 4425 4029
Email: modinach@yahoo.com

MAURITANIA - MAURITANIE

M. Ould Baba HOUSSEIN
Chef
Division d'hygiène publique
Centre National d'hygiène de Nouakchott
BP 695
Nouakchott
Phone: +222 662 3127
Fax: +222 525 31 34
Email: hus.dab@caramail.com

MOROCCO - MAROC

M. Mohamed MAJDI
Chef de la Division de la Répression des Fraudes
Ministère de l'Agriculture, du Développement Rural
et des Pêches Maritimes
DPVCTI. B.P. 1308
10100 Rabat
Fax: + 212 3 7297544
Email: mmajdi@menara.ma

M. Zine EL ALAMI
Directeur des Laboratoires
Etablissement Autonome de Contrôle et de
Coordination des Exportations
72 Angle Bd.Med.smiha et Rue Med El Baamrani
Casablanca
Phone: +212 (22) 31 4480
Fax: +212 (22) 30 5168
Email: zineelalami@eacce.org.ma

M. Lhoussaine SAAD
Direction de la Protection des Végétaux des
Contrôles Techniques et de la Répression des
Fraudes
Département de l'Agriculture et du Développement
Rural
Rabat
Phone: +212 37297546
Fax: +212 37298150
Email: saad_lho@yahoo.fr

M. Ahmed FAOUZI
Ministre Plénipotentiaire
Représentant permanent adjoint auprès de la FAO
Ambassade du Royaume du Maroc
Via Lazzaro Spallanzani 8-10
00161 Rome

M. Khalid EL BASRI
Office National des Pêches
Département des Pêches Maritimes
Ministère de l'agriculture, du développement rural et
des pêches maritimes
Casablanca
Phone: +022 24 0551
Fax: + 022 246691
Email: elbasri@onp.co.ma

Mme Sabah LAZRAQ
Direction des Industries de la Pêche
Département des Pêches Maritimes
Rabat
Phone: +00212 37688274
Fax: +00212 37688294
Email: lazrak@mpm.gov.ma

Mme Hanane IBNOULKHATIB
Direction du Médicament et de la Pharmacie
Département de la Santé
Ministère de l'agriculture, du développement rural et
des pêches maritimes
Place Abdallah Chefchaouni, Quartier Administratif
Rabat Chellah
Phone: + 070 514034
Fax: +037 772520/037 681931
Email: ibnhan@yahoo.fr

Mlle Samira YOUSFI
Direction de la Réglementation et du Contrôle
Département de l'Environnement
Ministère de l'Aménagement du territoire, de l'eau et
de l'environnement
Rabat
Phone: +037 682573
Fax: +037 682573
Email: drc@minev.gov.ma

Mme Nezha HAFID
Société LESIEUR Cristal
Phone: +00212 22679383
Fax: +00212 22679391
Email: hafid@lesieur-cristal.co.ma

MOZAMBIQUE

Dr Eduarda Maria MUNGÓI
Head of the Standardization Department -Dr-
Veterinary
National Institute of Standardization and Quality
Av. 25 de Setembro, 1179-2º andar
Maputo
Phone: +258 1 303822/3
Fax: +258 1 304 206
Email: eduardamungoi@hotmail.com,
innoq@emilnoz.com

Dr Maria HAUENGUE
Biologist-MPH
Department of Environmental Health
Ministry of Health
Eduardo Mondlane Avenue
P.O. box 264
Maputo
Phone: +258 1 310281
Fax: +258 1 310281
Email: mariahaugue@hotmail.com/
mariahaugue@yahoo.com

Mr Khalid CASSAM
Agronomist
Head of Pesticide Registration and Control Section
Department of Plant Health
National Directorate Agriculture
Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development
Maputo
Phone: +258 1 462034/460591
Fax: +258 1 462035/460591
Email: kcassam@setsan.org.mz

NIGER

Mme Hassane AÏSSATOU CISSÉ
Responsable Cellule Nutrition Alimentation
Ministère du développement agricole
Direction Cultures Vivrières
B.P. 323 Niamey
Phone: +00227 796 9423/931504
Fax: +00227 75 2775
Email: boureima_moussa@yahoo.fr

NIGERIA

Mr Olatunji Adebawale ADENOLA
Director
Strategic Grains Reserve Department
Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural
Development
Area 11, Garki –
P.M.B. 135 Abuja
Phone: +09 2344958
Fax: +09 2344382
Email: nsgrfma@hotmail.com

Mrs M.E. ESHIETT
Deputy Director
Standards Organization of Nigeria
13/14 Victoria Arobieke Street
Lekki (Phase I)
Lagos
Phone: +234 1 2708238
Fax: +234 1 2708246
Email: megesciatt@yahoo.com

Mrs Jane NZEOMA
Chief Regulatory Officer
National Agency for Food and Drug Administration
and Control
23 Temple Road
Ikoyi
Lagos
Phone: +234 1 2690676
Fax: +234 1 2695006
Email: janenzeoma@yahoo.com

Mr Bamidele Joseph SUNDAY
Principal Technical Officer
Strategic Grains Reserve Department
Federal Ministry of Agriculture and Rural
Development
Area 11, Garki - P.M.B. 135
Abuja
Phone: +09 2344958
Fax: +09 2344382
Email: ngrfma@hotmail.com

Dr Olusola FAKANKUN
Regulatory Affairs Manager
Nestle Nigeria
PLC 22/24 Industrial Avenue
Ilupeju
Lagos
Phone: +01 4978720-4 Ext 407
Fax: +01 4963031
Email: olusola.fakankun@ng.nestle

Mr G.O. BAPTIST
Consultant
Box 22 Juli House
Post Office
Tkeja, Lagos
Phone: +234 1 492 4553/0803 3651/72

Mr Peter ATTAH
Deputy Director
Federal Ministry of Commerce
PMB 88 Garki
Abuja
Phone: 0803 4090390
Email: pkattah@yahoo.com

Mr Samuel NEGEDU
Deputy Director
Federal Department of Agriculture and Rural
Development
Abuja
Phone: +0803 3651/72
Email: negedu@mail.com

SENEGAL

M. Moussa Bocar LY
Ministre Conseiller
Ambassade du Sénégal
Via Giuli 66
00186 Roma
Phone: +06.6872353
Fax: +06.68219294
Email : moussabocar@yahoo.fr

SIERRA LEONE

Mr Francis M. PALMER
Ag. Manager
Food Standards Department
Sierra Leone Standards Bureau
SLPMB Headquarters Building
Cline Town
Freetown
C.T. Box 11
Phone: + 232 22 228374
Fax: +232 22 224437
Email: slstandards@sierratel.sl

SOUTH AFRICA - AFRIQUE DU SUD

Dr B. NTSHABELE
Manager: Meat, Poultry and Dairy Products
Department of Agriculture
Private Bag X250
0001 Pretoria
Phone: +27 12 3196754
Fax: +27 12 3196867
Email: boitshokon@nda.agric.za

Ms F. MAKHOANE
Assistant Director
Directorate:Food Control
Department of Health
Private Bag X828
0001 Pretoria
Phone: +27 12 3120158
Fax: + 27 12 312 3162
Email: makhof@health.gov.za

Mr G. JOUBERT
Technical Advisor
South African Bureau of Standards
Private Bag X191
0001 Pretoria
Phone: +27 12 4286086
Fax: +27 12 4286466
Email: joubergj@sabs.co.za

Mr D. JACOBS
Senior Inspector
South African Bureau of Standards
P.O. Box 615
7701 Rondebosch
Phone: +27 21 6895511
Fax: +27 21 6896128
Email: jacobsdc@sabs.co.za

Ms K. VOKES
Food Law Group
Consumer Goods Council South Africa
P.O. Box 41417
2024 Craighall
Phone: +27 11 6440881
Fax: +27 11 6440673
Email: kvokes@afr.ko.com

SUDAN - SOUDAN

Mr Mohamed Said Mohamed Ali HARBI
Counsellor (Agricultural Affairs)
Permanent Representative to FAO
Embassy of the Republic of the Sudan
Via Lazzaro Spallanzani, 24
00161 Rome
Phone: +06 4403071
Fax: +06 440358
Email: permoffice_sudanembassyrome@yahoo.it

Mr Babiker Ali ABDEL KARIN
Chargé d'Affaires
Embassy of the Republic of the Sudan
Via Lazzaro Spallanzani, 24
00161 Rome

SWAZILAND

Mr Edmund DLAMINI
Principal Environmental Health Officer
P.O. Box 5
Mbabane
Phone: +268 4042431
Fax: +268 4042092
Email: edmunddlamini@yahoo.co.uk

Mr Funwako E. DLAMINI
Regional Environmental Health Officer
Ministry of Health and Social Welfare
Manzini
Phone: +268 5052042
Fax: +268 5053804
Email: fedlamin@yahoo.com

TOGO

M. Kokou EGUE
Directeur
Laboratoires du contrôle de la qualité
Institut togolais de Recherche Agronomique
Ministère de l'Agriculture, de l'Élevage et de la
Pêche
Lomé
Phone: +228 225 21 48
Fax: +228 225 15 59
Email: itra@cafe.tg/eguekokou@yahoo.fr

UGANDA - OUGANDA

Dr Terry KAHUMA
Executive Director
Uganda National Bureau of Standards
P.O. Box 6329
Kampala
Phone: +256 41222367/505995
Fax: +256 41286123
Email: unbs@infocom.co.ug/tkahuma@unbs.org

Dr Ben MANYINDO
Head Technical Operations Department
Uganda National Bureau of Standards
P.O. Box 6329
Kampala
Phone: +256 41 222367/505 995
Fax: +256 41286123
Email: unbs@infocom.co.ug/
ben.manyindo@unbs.org

Mr Samuel G.L. BALAGADDE
Head Technical Liaison Division
Uganda National Bureau of Standards
P.O. Box 6329 Kampala
Phone: +256 41222367/9
Fax: +256 41286123
Email:
unbs@infocom.co.ug/samuel.balagadde@unbs.org

UNITED REPUBLIC OF TANZANIA - RÉPUBLIQUE-UNIE DE TANZANIE -

Mr Daimon Jim MWAKYEMBE
Director
Tanzania Bureau of Standards
Dar-es-Salaam
Phone: +(255 22)2450298/2450206
Fax: +255 22 2450959
Email: mwakyembedj@yahoo.co.uk
info@tbs.or.tz

Dr Claude John Shara MOSHA
Codex Contact Point Officer
Chief Standards Officer
Tanzania Bureau of Standards
P.O. Box 9524
Dar-es-Salaam
Phone: +(255 22) 2450298/2450206
Fax: +255 22 2450959
Email: cjsmosha@yahoo.co.uk/info@tbs.or.tz

ZAMBIA - ZAMBIE

Mrs Christabel MALIJANI
Chief, Policy Analyst
Food Safety
Ministry of Health
P.O. Box 30205 Lusaka
Phone: + 260 1 253040
Fax: + 260 1 253 344
Email: anyangwes@zm.afro.who.int

ZIMBABWE

H.E. Mary Margaret MUCHADA
Ambassador
Permanent Representative to FAO
Embassy of the Republic of Zimbabwe
Via Virgilio, 8
00193 Rome
Phone: +06 68308282
Fax: +06 68308324

Mr David NHARI
Chief Government Analyst
Government Analyst Laboratory
Ministry of Health and Child Welfare
Box CV 231 Causeway
Harare
Phone: +263 4 708520
Fax: +263 4 708527
Email: dbnhari@africaonline.co.zw

Mr Michael Muchenje NYERE
Counsellor
Alternate Permanent Representative to FAO
Embassy of the Republic of Zimbabwe
Via Virgilio, 8
00193 Rome
Phone: +06 68308282
Fax: +06 68308324

**OBSERVER COUNTRY
PAYS OBSERVATEUR**

**UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ÉTATS-UNIS D'AMÉRIQUE**

Mr Stephen HAWKINS
Food Safety Policy Advisor
Food Safety Inspection Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 1156 South Bldg
Washington, D.C. 20250-3700
Phone: +202 690 1022
Fax: +202 690 3856
Email: stephen.hawkins@fsis.usda.gov

Dr Abdel-Razak M. KADRY
Chief, Technical Analysis and Data Evaluation
Branch
Office of Public Health Sciences, Risk Assessment
Division
Food Safety Inspection Service
U.S. Department of Agriculture
1400 Independence Avenue, SW
Room 333 Aerospace Center
Washington DC 20250
Phone: +202 690 6608
Fax: +202 690 6337
Email: Abdel-razak.kadry@fsis.usda.gov

**INTERNATIONAL NON-GOVERNMENTAL
ORGANIZATIONS
ORGANISATIONS NON-GOUVERNEMENTALES
INTERNATIONALES**

**CONSUMERS INTERNATIONAL
ORGANISATION INTERNATIONALE DES
CONSOMMATEURS**

Mr Samuel OCHIENG
Consumer Information Network
P.O. Box 7569
Nairobi 00300
Kenya
Phone: +254 207 81131/254 722 555099
Fax: +254 207 97944
Email: cin@insightkenya.com

**INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL OF GROCERY
MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION**

Dr Mark F. NELSON
Vice President, Scientific and Regulatory Policy
Grocery Manufacturers of America
Secretariat, International Council of Grocery
Manufacturers Associations
2401 Pennsylvania Ave. N.W. 2nd Floor
Washington, D.C. 20037-1730
USA
Phone: +1 202 295 3955
Fax: +1 202 3374508
Email: mnelson@gmabrands.com

**FAO PERSONNEL
PERSONNEL DE LA FAO**

Mr Hartwig DE HAEN
Assistant Director-General
Economic and Social Department
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla
00100 Rome
Italy
Phone: + 39 06-570 54110
Fax: +39 06-570 54110
Email: hartwig.dehaen@fao.org

Mr Kraisid TONTISIRIN
Director
Food and Nutrition Division
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla
00100 Rome
Italy
Phone: + 39 06-570 53330
Fax: +39 06 570 54593
Email: kraisid.tontisirin@fao.org

Mr Ezzeddine BOUTRIF
Chief
Food Quality and Standards Service
Food and Nutrition Division
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla
00100 Rome, Italy
Phone: +39 06 570 56156
Fax: +39 06 570 54593
Email: ezzeddine.boutrif@fao.org

Ms Maya Pineiro
Officer-in-Charge
Food Quality and Consumer Protection Group
Food Quality and Standards Service
Food and Nutrition Division
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla
00100 Rome
Italy
Phone: +39 06 570 55308
Fax: +39 06 570 54593
Email: maya.pineiro@fao.org

Ms Londa VANDERWAL
Consultant
Food Quality and Standards Service
Food and Nutrition Division
Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla
00100 Rome
Italy
Phone: +39 06 570 55636
Fax: +39 06 570 54593
Email: londa.vanderwal@fao.org

Mr Cheikh NDIAYE
Senior Food and Nutrition Officer
Economic and Social Department Group
Regional Office for Africa
FAO Building
Gamel Abdul Nasser Road
P.O. Box GP 1628
Accra
Ghana
Phone: +233 21 7010930 ext. 3154
Fax: +233 21 7010943
Email: Cheikh.ndiaye@fao.org

Mr Georges E. CODJIA
Regional Food and Nutrition Officer
FAO Sub-Regional Office for Southern and Eastern Africa
11th Floor Old Mutual Centre
Cnr Third St/Jason Moyo Avenue
P.O. Box 3730 Harare
Phone: +263-4 253655/8 ext 248
Fax: +263-4 703496
Email: Georges.Codjia@fao.org

**WHO PERSONNEL
PERSONNEL DE LA OMS**

Dr Patience MENSAH
Regional Advisor Food Safety
WHO African Region
Regional Office for Africa
BP 06 Brazzaville
Republic of Congo
Phone: +47241 39007
Fax: +47 241 39501/3
Email: mensahp@afro.who.int



FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for Africa

Revised objectives and themes

1. Objectives of the Conference

FAO and WHO are convening this Regional Conference on Food Safety for Africa to respond to requests from member countries for policy advice and capacity building. Specifically, the Conference will work to:

- Facilitate dynamic and sustainable communication on continuing and emerging food safety issues important to all countries of the African region and identify harmonized, practical and sustainable actions to address these issues;
- Identify opportunities for improving international and regional cooperation in promoting food safety in order to protect consumers and their health and to develop positive food trade relations, taking into account the prevailing conditions in the entire food chain;
- Promote the strengthening and/or the establishment of regional and sub-regional networks for the exchange of food safety-related information and experiences among all stakeholders;
- Encourage public/private partnerships for consumer awareness raising, capacity building, and food safety issues in general;
- Identify strengths in specific subjects of food safety within the region and means to utilize these strengths as part of an over-arching policy to continuously improve food safety.

2. Proposed Conference themes/agenda items

A) National food safety systems in Africa – a situation analysis

Lead authors: FAO/WHO Regional and sub-regional food safety officers

- *Each participating country should prepare a Conference Room Document outlining its national food safety situation, including the components listed below.*
- *The paper will be prepared based on these inputs, as well as other existing sources of information on food safety in the region*

○ Economic impacts of food safety systems

- Decreased health care costs, improved worker productivity due to decreased disease burden;
- Increase in availability of palatable, wholesome food;
- Increased consumer confidence in food supply;
- Increased trade opportunities and export premiums;
- Opportunity costs of lack of food safety measures;
- Increase in tourism and other related industries.

○ Health impacts of food safety systems

- Food borne disease prevalence and statistics from across Africa;
 - Importance of regional, national and local monitoring and surveillance systems and reporting of information in detection, rapid response, and estimation of the burden of food borne disease outbreaks;
 - Use of statistics in establishing and evaluating priorities in food borne disease prevention and control.
 - The importance of food safety for immuno- compromised persons
- Social impacts of food safety systems
 - Safe food as a right for all people and its inherent nature in the definition of food security;
 - The role of food safety in emergency situations, including in the feeding of refugees and in food aid
 - Means of gaining political will for improving food safety.
 - Overview of food safety systems in selected countries from different sub-regions of Africa covering the following points:
 - Legal and policy framework, including basic laws, enabling regulations and appropriate implementation mechanisms;
 - Human resource capacity situation;
 - Food standards and technical regulations, including the implementation of Codex texts;
 - Food-borne disease surveillance;
 - Coordination of activities of all organizations involved in food safety management;
 - Laboratory support services for all relevant food hazards;
 - Food inspection and enforcement mechanisms, at both domestic and international levels;
 - Public/private partnerships for on-going training of food control and food industry officials and for consumer awareness raising;
 - Communication among all stakeholders;
 - Challenges faced and approaches used to effectively overcome challenges;
 - Extent of the use of the food chain approach (primary production, processing, distribution, etc);
 - Analysis of the strengths in the region and how to utilize these strengths as part of an over-arching policy to continuously improve food safety in Africa.

B) Prioritization and coordination of capacity building activities

Lead author: Mauritania, with input from FAO/WHO

- Accurate evaluation of strengths and weaknesses of national food control situations;
- Identification of specific urgent and important capacity building needs;
- Long-term sustainability of the results of capacity building activities;
- Prioritization for utilizing limited timeframes and budget;
- Networking with other regional and national activities and in public/private/ civil society partnerships to increase effectiveness;
- Fostering technical assistance among countries within the region.

C) Informal food distribution sector (street foods and foods sold in schools): importance and challenges

Lead author: Zimbabwe, with input from Consumers International and FAO/WHO

- Importance of the sector- nutritional, cultural, socio-economic considerations;
- Challenges of ensuring safe products;
- Efforts currently underway, such as microbial risk assessment activities.

D) Assuring Food Safety and Quality in Small and Medium-size Food Enterprises

Lead author: Botswana, with input from ICGMA and FAO/WHO

- Economic and socio-economic importance of the sector;
- Application of appropriate quality assurance schemes;
- Controlling the safety and quality of SME foods.
- Should also include artisanal (very small enterprises) production of foods

E) International, regional, sub-regional and national cooperation in food safety

Lead authors: FAO/WHO Regional and sub-regional food safety officers

- Need for establishing or further strengthening regional and sub-regional networks (such as INFOSAN) for food safety information and communication;
- Challenges in meeting operational requirements and sustainability;
- Public/private partnerships for regional and sub-regional capacity building and food safety issues in general;
- Need for collaboration, coordination, and communication between public health laboratories, government ministries, NGOs, consumers, and other local, national sub-regional and regional partners;
- Need for cooperation between countries for border patrol and to prevent dumping of sub-standard foodstuffs;
- Provision of coordinated, effective regional input to the Codex system;
- The importance of sub-regional groupings and their past experiences in implementing improvements to the food safety system;
- Development of a system to identify and record the strengths and weaknesses in the areas of food safety in each country in the region, so that countries strong in one area can assist countries weak in that area.