



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
ORGANIZATION
OF THE UNITED NATIONS



WORLD
HEALTH
ORGANIZATION

FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for Africa

Summary Report of the Briefing Meeting
Geneva, 29 June 2004

1. Opening of the meeting

A briefing meeting for the FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for Africa was held in Geneva, on the occasion of the 27th Session of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, on 29 June 2004. The meeting was attended by 32 participants; representing 16 countries of the African region (see List of Participants in Annex 1). Ms Kerstin Leitner, Assistant Director-General, Sustainable Development and Healthy Environments, WHO, welcomed the delegates on behalf of WHO and FAO. She reminded the delegates of the informal nature and the limited time available for the meeting, and encouraged participants to make their interventions accordingly. The participants were reminded that the meeting was being held to seek the views and recommendations of the delegates regarding the content, practical organization and budget of the proposed Conference.

Mr Ezzeddine Boutrif, FAO secretariat for the Conference, presented the background and objectives of the Conference, as listed in the working document for the meeting made available to all participants. The food safety conferences held in other regions, the Global Fora of Food Safety Regulators, and the advice from the most recent Codex Coordinating Committee for Africa were mentioned. He recalled that the objectives of the regional conferences are not overlapping with, but complementary to other related meetings such as the FAO and WHO Regional Conferences and bodies, Regional Codex Coordinating Committees, or meetings such as the Second Global Forum of Food Safety Regulators. The input of previous meetings held to plan this Conference were also briefly discussed, and it was stated that this input is being utilized in planning the Conference.

2. Objectives and potential themes for the Conference

Mr Jorgen Schlundt, WHO secretariat for the Conference, presented the proposed themes and agenda items for the Conference, as listed in the working document for the meeting. Delegates provided valuable feedback and suggested other important themes of concern to the region, as reflected in the revised Conference objectives and themes (Annex 2). The meeting discussed that the Conference should not only present an analysis of the current food safety situation in Africa, but that it should discuss practical and specific solutions to the real needs and concerns of the region. Participants discussed that other work done previously by FAO and WHO in the region, including sub-regional work in UEMOA, SADC and other sub-regions, and the work of the national and regional offices should be used to provide input to the content of this Conference. The importance of the sustainability of the communication and the improvement in food safety after the conclusion of the Conference was also emphasized.

3. Preparation of documentation for the Conference

The Secretariat explained the procedure used successfully in other regional conferences, where the countries of the region, with direction from FAO/WHO, volunteer to prepare the documents for the Conference. Countries were urged to volunteer to prepare a paper on one of the specific themes, based on best practices used in their countries. Rather than preparing regional synthesis papers for all themes before the Conference, it was discussed that the common and salient issues from each sub-topic would emerge during the Conference itself.

Participants agreed that this procedure could also be used in Africa, and volunteered to prepare specific papers as indicated in Annex 2 (list of objectives and themes). In addition, the delegation of Kenya offered to prepare a paper on food standards and regulations and the delegation from Uganda volunteered to prepare at least 2 papers, but would need further consultation within the country regarding the specific topics to be prepared. The secretariat will provide guidance on the format and content of each paper to the relevant countries.

The countries of the region were also encouraged to prepare Conference Room Documents outlining the food safety situation in their country (for theme B in Annex 2), following a format prescribed by FAO/WHO. The secretariat will commission one focal point to analyze the information contained in those papers to draw regional conclusions and prepare one working document on the subject for the Conference.

4. Duration, date, and place of the Conference

The Secretariat emphasized that the venue of the Conference must be carefully determined, based on cost implications of that location, available facilities, geographic location within the region, and other pertinent factors. The meeting was informed that this matter had been discussed at length during the 23rd FAO Regional Conference for Africa (Johannesburg, 1-5 March 2004) where the delegates determined that the issue should be agreed upon by the Permanent Representatives to FAO in Rome.

FAO and WHO will agree upon the duration, location and date of the Conference before the end of July 2004 and will proceed with the planning of the Conference accordingly.

5. Timetable of preparatory actions

The timeframe of necessary preparatory actions will be determined based on the scheduled date of the Conference.

6. Support required

The FAO and WHO secretariat have begun to negotiate with potential donors to facilitate this Conference. The meeting noted that the current budget for the Conference includes allocation for travel and DSA of two participants from each of the low and middle income countries of the region, based on the World Bank classification of income status.

The countries of the region have agreed to support the preparation of the Conference by preparing discussion papers for the Conference as indicated. No other offers of direct or indirect support were provided.

The meeting was closed at 19:30 hours on 29 June 2004.



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Annex 1

FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for Africa

Briefing Meeting

Salle 18, International Conference Centre, Geneva
18:00 hours, Tuesday, 29 June 2004

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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 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 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 and capacity building in food safety;
- 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) The importance of food safety for African countries

Possible author: FAO/WHO regional offices with inputs from countries in the Region

- Economic impact of food safety measures
 - 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.
- 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
 - The little food available in these situations must be safe to ensure maximum use of the little available nutrients.
- Means of gaining political will for improving food safety.

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

Possible author: FAO/WHO Regional offices

- 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;
 - 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.

Each participating country should prepare a Conference Room Document outlining its national food safety situation, including the above components. A consultant could help to synthesize this information to prepare one discussion paper based on the national input.

C) Impact of current food safety systems in Africa on human health and food trade

Possible author: To be determined by the FAO/WHO Secretariat

- 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.

D) Prioritization and coordination of capacity building activities

Possible author: Mauritania

- 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 partnerships to increase effectiveness;
- Fostering technical assistance among countries within the region.

E) Informal food distribution sector (street foods): importance and challenges

Possible authors: Zimbabwe, with input from Consumers International and FAO/WHO

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

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

Possible author: Botswana

- Economic importance of the sector;
- Application of appropriate quality assurance schemes;
- Controlling the safety and quality of SME foods.

G) Regional, sub-regional and national cooperation in food safety

Possible authors: To be determined by the FAO/WHO Secretariat

- 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;
- Need for collaboration, coordination, and communication between public health laboratories, government ministries, NGOs, consumers, and other local, national sub-regional and regional partners;
- 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.

I) Other suggested topics:

1) Information exchange, communication, and education

Possible author: To be determined by the FAO/WHO Secretariat

- The role and responsibility of governments in disseminating food safety information
- Increasing the availability of current and understandable information (such as the WHO 5 keys) to all stakeholders (academics, consumers, food vendors, etc) within each country;
- Involvement of the mass media in disseminating the message of food safety to the general public;
- The importance of information flow in both directions between FAO/WHO and member countries;
- Sustainability of these communications, even if no internet access is available;
- Food safety education at all levels, formal and informal.