EMPOWERING CONSUMERS TO MAKE **HEALTHY FOOD CHOICES** AND SUPPORT **SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS**

KEY MESSAGES

Food safety is a shared responsibility where all of us, as consumers, play an important role.

Given the complexity of food safety, consumers need access to timely, clear and reliable information about the nutritional and disease risks associated with their food choices.

Traditional and new communication tools need to be embraced to enhance food safety through better transparency, effective dialogue and cooperation.

In today's changing world, for consumers to be empowered to make healthy food choices and help make food systems viable for the long term, their interaction with governments needs to be based on mutual trust and understanding.

Consumer engagement can lead to stronger and more sustainable food systems and better regulations.

INTRODUCTION

Food is personal – it reflects our cultural background, lifestyles, values and purchasing power. Food is essential to our survival: it largely determines our health and well-being. In today's globalized and rapidly urbanizing world, what we eat is changing. Food systems are changing and becoming increasingly complex and this tends to create uncertainty and concern for us as consumers. It is critical that civil society representatives and governments reflect on how they engage with consumers to "demystify" the global food system, understand consumers' views and concerns, provide reliable information to guide healthy and safe food choices and create conditions that enable constructive dialogue and trust.

Unsafe food and unhealthy dietary choices are considered major contributors to the global burden of disease. Our behaviours as consumers can mitigate or exacerbate risks of unhealthy diets. Informed consumers are willing to increase their consumption of nutritious foods, providing they are affordable and available, but there has been less success in persuading consumers to avoid unhealthy food. Governments, civil society groups and progressive elements of the food industry all have an interest in influencing consumer choices to optimize health. Consumers have the power to drive change. For a growing number, food choices are not only about their own health but about that of future generations and the planet, including the impact on climate change. By turning this collective interest into action, more consumers can be empowered to make food choices that are good for their health and well-being and the world we live in. Information tools have been revolutionized in recent years with the internet and social media becoming important sources of information but also mis-information. The traditional tools to inform consumers about food and risk – such as labelling, brochures, radio, TV programs, workshops – can be complemented with innovative communication tools, which also allow for dialogue and consumer engagement, enhance transparency and accountability and facilitate learning and behaviour change.

Our confidence, as consumers, in regulators and in the management of food systems is more important than ever given the sustainability challenges that lie ahead and the innovations on the horizon.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR BETTER CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT ON FOOD SAFETY

1.
SHARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT

Because food safety is a shared responsibility and effective involvement of consumers is a huge task, it is necessary for several parties to be involved in complementary ways. Along with the governmental authorities, consumer associations and other civil society groups and academia have an important role in creating conditions whereby consumers are enabled and encouraged to make healthy food choices in the context of sustainable food systems. The media, and increasingly social media, also have an important role in transmission of information and mechanisms are needed to ensure this is as accurate and helpful as possible.

2.
DIETARY TRANSITIONS AND THE TRIPLE BURDEN OF MALNUTRITION NECESSITATE ACTION

Urbanization, globalization and changing marketing systems are among the factors that are driving dietary transitions. Food-purchasing choices are complex, driven by values and are constrained by

economic and geographical limitations, and by knowledge insufficiency. When choosing foods, in addition to cost and calories, individuals may place variable emphasis on factors such as, diversity, freshness, sustainable production, safety, health benefits and other normative pressures. It is imperative that decision makers in the realm of food safety and public health, be aware of changing dietary patterns and the implications for health and wellbeing. Obesity is no longer a phenomenon of "wealthy" countries: it is widely recognized as a global epidemic affecting every continent and across social conditions. Changing diets, or even "non-traditional marketing of traditional foods" may also be associated with new food safety hazards which need to be effectively managed to minimize risk. Poor sanitation and infrastructure in low income urban settings in some developing countries can also lead to exposure to food safety risk. Furthermore, poverty increases the risk of making unsafe food choices. Understanding the knowledge gaps as well as the social and economic factors influencing consumers' food-related choices is a critical step in changing behaviour. Creating conditions that are conducive to behaviour change will require sound evidence, informed food safety and nutrition policies and the mainstreaming of food safety and nutrition into agricultural and broader investment policies.

food safety standards be based on science. It is also generally recognized that consumers are a key partner in national food safety systems and that constructive engagement between regulators and consumers is not only good, but necessary. How can regulators build a bridge between these two essential aspects of food control? This is a challenging task for several reasons. Firstly, food safety sciences are complex and experts often have difficulties to convey risk assessment decisions to non-experts. Secondly, experts and consumers tend to have differing perceptions of risk. Thirdly, the dynamism of the food system and related technologies magnify the challenges: analytical techniques reveal minute traces of previously undetected contaminants; information on food safety and contaminants – of varying degrees of credibility – are readily available to the general public; food produced far away, at multiple locations, through innovative means and with new ingredients is on the market.

Overcoming the challenges requires concerted effort from many sides. Scientists need to get better at addressing and clearly explaining

uncertainty surrounding risk. Policy-makers need to stay apprised of changes in food systems and adapt regulations accordingly, ensuring transparency throughout the process, particularly of value judgements. Civil society groups and other intermediaries need to contribute to the dialogue and facilitate consumers' understanding of key issues considering their unfamiliarity with concepts of quantitative probabilities and uncertainties.

4.
DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE STRATEGIES FOR ENHANCED PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

The challenge for educators and regulators is to find ways to go beyond the simple transmission of data, and to identify strategies to engage and empower all consumers to make healthy food choices and support sustainable food systems. Technological advances and new communication tools and services offer new and powerful opportunities to engage and involve stakeholders in interactive dialogue. Traditional methods of consumer engagement, such as mass

3.
UNDERSTANDING FOOD SAFETY HAZARDS AND UNCERTAINTIES AS FOOD SYSTEMS BECOME MORE COMPLEX

In a multi-lateral trading environment where harmonized standards and agreed approaches to regulation are critical to achieving efficient and safe trade, there is global agreement that

media, conferences, meetings and other face-to-face interactions, can be complemented by these new means. Specifically, these communication tools can be highly personalized, allow for interactive guided discovery learning such as through virtual reality or simulations. Social media can also be used to keep industry and government more accountable for food safety and quality.

5.
HARNESSING MARKET DRIVERS OF FOOD SAFETY

The private sector plays a central role in assuring food safety. Indeed, historically, most improvements in food safety came about as firms responded to consumer demand for safe, authentic food. In the 18th and 19th century, food in the fast-growing cities of the USA and Europe was massively contaminated and adulterated. Currently, they have some of the safest food systems in the world. Change was largely the result of public demand often driven by publicity around problematic practices. Studies have found a high willingness to pay for safer food, when consumers have confidence in the food source, label or brand. Less well understood is how consumer demand for safety can be harnessed in mass markets where supply chains are fragmented and information— about food sources and quality—is missing or unreliable. Private 3rd party schemes have emerged as a widely used mechanism for providing assurance of food characteristics, including safety, particularly for businesses exporting food and for access to lucrative domestic market segments. Discussions on the use of such schemes in the context of official food control have developed constructively over the last few years and draft Guidelines on this will be considered by the Codex Alimentarius Commission in July 2019. There is wide consensus that the use of these schemes must in no way marginalize the role of official authorities but rather facilitate the implementation of food safety policies and help public authorities focus their efforts where it is most needed. Given the costs involved, the "global" schemes serve only to drive food safety in the higher value market segments, however, many countries are developing systems of national certification that can contribute to driving better food safety practices more broadly in domestic supply chains. There are good and bad examples of how this has been used. Other appropriate government actions can also empower consumers to effectively demand safer food and value chains to respond to this. Improving transparency, accountability and performance can increase trust in the food system allowing it to better contribute to nutrition, health and economic goals.

THE FUTURE OF FOOD SAFETY

Transforming knowledge into action for people, economies and the environment

ADDIS ABABA
12–13 February 2019

The First FAO/WHO/AU International Food Safety Conference

GENEVA
23–24 April 2019

The FAO/WHO/WTO International Forum on Food Safety and Trade

CONTACTS

FAO
Food Safety and Quality Unit
Rome, Italy
food-quality@fao.org

WHO
Food Safety and Zoonoses Department
Geneva, Switzerland
foodsafety@who.int