



APPENDIX --

REPORT OF THE HIGH-LEVEL SPECIAL EVENT
ON FOOD QUALITY AND SAFETY

WEDNESDAY, 21 NOVEMBER 2007

The High Level Special Event on Food Quality and Safety was held on 21 November 2007 in the Green Room. Delegations from 57 countries (and three INGOs), including five ministers, attended the Event.

In his introductory statement, the Director-General of FAO highlighted the changing nature of food production and consumption, the increased public awareness of food safety and quality issues, and the need for countries to continuously improve their food control systems. He referred to FAO's work in food safety and quality through the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission, the work of the expert bodies and consultations that provide independent scientific advice, and the technical assistance and capacity-building activities in support of developing countries efforts in this field.

His Excellency Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, President of Equatorial Guinea, emphasized the importance of food safety for developing countries and the need to address the issues of low availability of food, along with food safety and quality, in a comprehensive manner. His Excellency highlighted the impact of climate change on food production, as well as the effects of increasing levels of urbanization on food distribution and consumption patterns. He called upon industrialized countries to increase their assistance to developing countries to improved food production and processing techniques and other technical support.

The High-Level Special Event was chaired by His Excellency Ahmed El-Hawshabi, Minister of Agriculture and Irrigation of Yemen, who highlighted the initiatives taken by his country to strengthen food safety, including capacity-building efforts, increased information access, training, and inclusion of consumers in the food safety decision-making process. The need for developing countries to improve food safety to gain access to food export markets, and thus increase national income levels was highlighted.

Mr. Stuart Slorach, former Chairman of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, outlined some of the emerging food safety challenges facing FAO member countries, including the changing food safety environment, "new" chemical hazards, nanotechnology, and antimicrobial resistance. The need to strengthen international cooperation in assessing emerging food safety risks, as well as between FAO/WHO/ Codex and OIE and IPPC, was emphasized. He also underlined the need to provide more support to developing countries to accelerate development of their food safety systems for mutual benefit.

Background document entitled "Bridging the gap between food safety policies and implementation" was presented by José M. Sumpasi, Assistant Director-General, Agriculture and Consumer Protection Department, who noted the growing global focus on food safety. He also

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emphasized that improving food safety was a key policy objective, but that translating such policy into practice was a major challenge. Examples of recent trends that exacerbate the challenges faced, and experiences in food safety implementation in various countries and sub-sectors were given. Key implementation gaps and recommendations to bridging these gaps were presented.

Delegates commended the document prepared by the Secretariat and thanked FAO for the opportunity to discuss this topic, as well as for FAO's ongoing work in food safety capacity building and standard setting. One delegation noted that many Codex Members were facing difficulties to participate in all Codex meetings, and stressed the need to enhance the participation of all Codex Members, especially the developing countries. He further proposed that improvements be made to the geographical distribution of Codex Committees to address this problem. Several delegations emphasized the need for continued capacity building in food safety and quality, as well as strengthening the Codex Trust Fund to facilitate increased active participation of developing countries in the entire standard setting process. The need for FAO and WHO to continue to carry out food safety risk assessments at an international level was also underlined, as developing countries often do not have the resources to conduct these on their own. The importance of experts from developing countries participating in such risk assessments, and especially the importance of developing countries supplying data for such panels was underlined, so that these assessments reflect the conditions in developing countries.

Several delegations noted the ongoing activities in their country to improve food safety and quality, particularly those involving FAO. Several other countries made specific requests for FAO assistance in institutional building as well as in capacity strengthening in this field. The need to strengthen capacity in food safety at a regional/subregional level was also emphasized.

Some delegates referred to the growing importance and number of private standards in food trade. It was noted that many food importers enforce much stricter standards than the internationally-agreed Codex standards, making it difficult for developing countries' producers to access these markets. The continuing need for increased collaboration between FAO, WHO, OIE, ILO, and UNIDO in standards related to food trade was also noted.

The meeting was informed of Codex work in the area of foods derived from modern biotechnology, including the adopted guidelines on the conduct of safety assessment of such foods in 2003, and that FAO is currently establishing a database to provide access to information on such safety assessments conducted at the national level.

The meeting was also informed that all recommendations of the 2002 Joint Evaluation of Codex and FAO/WHO Food Standard Work had mostly been implemented, and that the review of Codex committee structure was currently underway.

The FAO secretariat noted the increasing number of requests for FAO technical assistance and the need for FAO to also elevate such assistance. The rising importance of the food safety and quality programme within FAO was also emphasized. The secretariat noted that countries could request technical assistance from FAO through the Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP) or by directly seeking support from donor agencies within their countries. It was noted that such projects could be prepared and conducted with the technical advice of FAO through various other funding agencies, such as the Standards and Trade Development Facility. The importance of involving the private sector in improving food safety and quality was underlined.