CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

World Health Organization
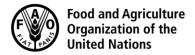
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla, 00153 Rome, Italy - Tel: (+39) 06 57051 - E-mail: codex@fao.org - www.codexalimentarius.org

Agenda item 5

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JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

FAO/WHO COORDINATING COMMITTEE FOR THE NEAR EAST

Eleventh Session

Rome, Italy, FAO Headquarters

18 - 22 September 2023

FOOD SAFETY AND QUALITY IN THE REGION - COUNTRY AND REGIONAL UPDATES

(Prepared by FAO and WHO)

1   Introduction and Background

Since the last CCNE, held in 2019[1], the world and the Codex Near East Region has lived through the global COVID-19 pandemic. This disrupted economies and affected the conduct of activities for those operating in the region as well as Codex Alimentarius, FAO, and WHO work. Many activities, and especially meetings, moved online and are now returning to in-person format combined with the ability for remote work and virtual participation in meetings.

As mentioned in the report of the 36th Session of the Regional Conference for the Near East held in 2022[2], and in the recently launched State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2023[3,4], the Near East region faces an increase in the trends of hunger, acute food insecurity and malnutrition. In addition, the Ukraine crisis has triggered food shortages and increased food price inflation, further adding to the burden on the region.

In parallel, the food sector on a global level continues to evolve and adapt, using new technologies, for example in cell-based foods[5].

This fast-changing environment affects the safety and quality of foods and requires that national food control systems can adapt, as needed, to new contexts, while still addressing known/persistent issues of concern.

Persistent concerns in the region, as brought to the attention to the CCNE 9th and 10th sessions[6], are:

  i.   Chemical food contamination
  ii.   Weakness of food control system / legal framework
  iii. Antimicrobial resistance
  iv.   Management of innovation / novel food
  v.   Food fraud

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[1] https://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/sh-proxy/en/?lnk=1&url=https%253A%252F%252Fworkspace.fao.org%252Fsites%252Fcodex%252FMeetings%252FCX-734-10%252FWorking%2Bdocuments%252Fne10_3e.pdf
[2] https://www.fao.org/3/ni214en/ni214en.pdf
[3] https://www.fao.org/publications/home/fao-flagship-publications/the-state-of-food-security-and-nutrition-in-the-world/en
[4] Near East and North Africa – Regional Overview of Food Security and Nutrition 2022 (fao.org)
[5] Cell-based food: its safety and its future role (fao.org)
[6] https://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/sh-proxy/en/?lnk=1&url=https%253A%252F%252Fworkspace.fao.org%252Fsites%252Fcodex%252FMeetings%252FCX-734-10%252FWorking%2Bdocuments%252Fne10_3e.pdf

FAO and WHO support to the region relies on engagement with the region and the feedback received by our respective Members. In this context, the RCCs remain an important forum for food safety and quality.

With this document, FAO And WHO present the activities conducted in the region since the last RCC.

2 Activities in the region

2.1 Regional Workshop – Enhancing food trade in the Near East and North Africa: Food safety and trade facilitation

FAO Regional Office for North Africa and Near East (RNE) organized a workshop in Amman, Jordan in May 2023to strengthen alignments between trade requirements and food safety and quality measures. The workshop aimed at improving the understanding of the government officials, national authorities, and other relevant target groups of the science-based standards (e.g., Codex Alimentarius), transparency and traceability and harmonizing food safety processes and costume check.

Showcasing country case studies and best practices, the workshop focused on trade-related aspects of food safety to enhance intra-regional trade. The topics of discussion included: Role of Standards in Safe Trade, WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Measures, Facilitating Safe Trade for food and agricultural products, Digital technologies for safe trade in food, Investing into safe trade and SPS implementation, as well as a focused discussion on private sector perspective.

Key recommendations reiterated the need for harmonization and agreed upon food quality & safety standards, establishing Regional Cooperation Platform for the NENA member states to facilitate dialogue, information sharing, and coordination on matters related food safety and quality standards, strengthening inspection and certification process, improving finance and investment on technology transfer, capacity building of inspectors and improved public private partnership for targeted investment plans.

2.2 Enhancing Food Trade in the NENA Region: Food Safety and Trade Facilitation

As part of FAO's technical support to the COMESA trade facilitation project - GCP/INT/387/COM, FAO supported the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Republic of the Sudan, and the Republic of Tunisia's competent authorities in strengthening their imported food control capacities. Specific activities included (i) national and sub-regional trainings; (ii) preparation and validation of national situation analysis reports and plans of action (PA) to strengthen food import control programmes in the Arab Republic of Egypt, the Republic of the Sudan and the Republic of Tunisia; (iii) finalization of draft standard operating procedures for border inspections and good importing practices for importers (formal and informal), and (iv) development and validation of a technical document for the exchange of information on food rejections and food control systems between trading partners. Additional technical support will be provided until May 2024 to further invest in and strengthen established dynamics at national and regional levels.

2.3 Research Network and Food Safety Innovation Hub (RNFSIH) – the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

The countries in the Near East and North Africa (NENA) region share key common challenges due to their limited natural resource capacity for production of wide range of crops essential to meet nutrition and food security needs of the population and heavy reliance on food imports. Ensuring food that is produced, distributed, or imported is safe is an essential element of agrifood policies and programs of governments in NENA countries. Sharing the expertise and experiences among the countries within the region and with other global networks could help in transferring knowledge and strengthening capacity of the agrifood systems actors in developing, applying, and scaling good and promising food safety practices in local context and local needs. A majority of the NENA countries still face several challenges including weakness in application of food safety risk analysis, lack of high-quality and fit for purpose academic programs, lack of scientific organizations to support science-based policy making, shortage of specialized training programmes for various agrifood systems actors among others. There is an acute need to fill those gaps through effective and innovative collaboration between all level of stakeholders in other countries and support the region in enhancing innovation (policy, digital, etc.) for national and regional harmonization of standards to ensure the food safety in the NENA countries.

The creation and establishment of a Research Network and Food Safety Innovation Hub (RNFSIH) supports innovation programs in managing and harmonizing food safety and quality systems that meet local needs; the development of innovative solutions and services at the national or regional level to strengthen food safety, and ultimately efficient value chain development and optimization of resource use; and supports the capacity

development of government institutions to ideate, develop and scale-up conducive strategies, policies, or programmes to mainstream innovation.

The RNFSIH will house the collaboration and innovation activities where appropriate to tackle various challenges on agrifood systems. This RNFSIH aims to become the vehicle for delivering innovation in all food safety aspects to FAO programmes, FAO partners, regions, countries and members in the region through identifying, catalysing, testing and upscaling broad-based and local-based solutions. This network hosts and supports national food safety innovations hubs which consist of institutions at varying levels of maturity. The strength of RNFSIH is to interconnect the governments, private sectors and academic institutions and bring synergy through the creation of sound innovation approaches and methodologies, which can be applied in the food safety and quality systems across the region.

2.4   The Arab Republic of Egypt

FAO and EBRD are supporting Egyptian agribusiness sector by strengthening compliance with food safety requirements in horticulture value chains in The Arab Republic of Egypt under the EBRD-EU Value Chains Competitiveness Programme to enhance the competitiveness of small and medium enterprises ("SMEs").   The capacity of Egyptian growers to meet basic food safety and quality requirements is a critical issue to facilitate access to markets and currently one of the main reasons for rejection of products in export markets. Pesticides and chemicals used by growers are of a big concern for Egyptian horticultural production. The non-conformities in the quality of exported produce result in rejection of exported goods, which negatively affects Egyptian food trade. The project has facilitated trainings based on detailed guidelines developed for target crops, specifically on food safety requirements, standards and pesticide management for farmers and SMEs engaged in sourcing raw materials and fresh produce in target export-oriented value chains in the Arab Republic of Egypt. The target cumulative outreach under this technical assistance project reached 100 SMEs. Key stakeholders included the Agricultural Export Council (AEC) and Horticultural Export Improvement Association (HEIA), as well as the Central Plant Quarantine Administration (CAPQ) and the National Food Safety Authority (NFSA). The project focused on five priority horticulture value chains – oranges, grapes, medicinal and aromatic plants, strawberries, and tomatoes. Key outputs include:

- Conducting a survey with 27 horticulture exporters, 106 farmers, and 59 inspectors from the Central Administration for Plant Quarantine (CAPQ) and NFSA to understand key sanitary and phytosanitary and pesticide residue issues – this fed into a needs assessment, which led to the five priority value chains being selected;
- Developing guidelines in English and Arabic for farmers and exporters on how to reduce food safety risks and manage pesticide residues for each of the five value chains, as well as producing a field tool on microbiological controls;
- Delivering training to 882 farmers, exporters, and inspectors across the five value chains on pesticide residue management and microbiological controls using the material developed;
- Three market assessments produced: i) Market Analysis and Selection of Export Oriented Horticulture Value Chains, ii) Eurasia Market Standards Study; iii) Expanding the Egyptian Horticultural Exports to Europe: Market Potentials and Challenges

2.5   The Islamic Republic of Iran

The FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific has recently operationalized a Technical Cooperation Programme (TCP/IRA/3901) entitled "Improving Pistachio`s production and export through establishment of integrated product management". The project will run from 2023 to 2025. Its major component is improving safety and quality control mechanisms and build institutional capacities for integrated pistachio product management. This project includes support to the laboratory on aflatoxin quantitation and upgrading analytical equipment and methods; updating pesticide MRLs and codes of practice for the reduction and prevention of aflatoxin contamination; upgrading value chain actions (including packaging) in line with good practices recommended by Codex Alimentarius; and advocacy campaigns aimed at increasing awareness across the chain with the aim of producing export quality products.

2.6   Abu Dhabi

Working closely with the Abu Dhabi Food Safety Authority, FAO facilitated an assessment of the food control system in Abu Dhabi using the FAO/WHO food control system assessment tool. This assessment included a concluded strategic planning workshop where a continuous improvement process was discussed, including the periodic self-re- assessment of the system, to ensure monitoring of progress and performance over time.

2.7   Antimicrobial resistance

2.7.1   FAO

From 2022-2023, FAO has continued to provide integrated and coherent assistance to countries in regulating and monitoring the use of antimicrobials and in preventing and minimizing the development and further spread of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) within the agrifood system, to humans and in the environment, and limit its effect on the safety and integrity of the food chain. These actions were carried out according to the FAO Action Plan on Antimicrobial Resistance 2021-2025[7], which works to combat antimicrobial resistance globally.

The countries in the region implementing activities in line with the Action Plan are the Arab Republic of The Arab Republic of Egypt, the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, the Kingdom of Bahrain, the Kingdom of Morocco, the Kingdom of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the Republic of Iraq, the Republic of The Republic of the Sudan, the Republic of Yemen, the State of Kuwait, the Sultanate of Oman, and the United Arab Emirates.

2.8   Codex Trust Fund Projects

The Codex Trust Fund (CTF2) is a joint FAO/WHO programme providing support to developing and transition economy countries to build strong and sustainable capacity to engage in Codex work. Since 2016, the CTF2 issues annual calls for individual and group applications from low- and middle- income countries eligible for support. To date, the CTF2 has funded 41 projects in 50 countries. An additional 7 projects were approved for funding in 2023.

The CTF2 aims to issue its eighth call for applications by September 2023. The call for applications will be announced on the CTF2 website, via Codex circular letter and other channels. Support for the drafting of applications for CTF2 support can be sought from FAO and WHO regional focal points and through the resources available on the CTF2 website. Furthermore, annual webinars on the CTF2 application process and the self-assessment through the Codex Diagnostic Tool are being organized on a regular basis. Countries eligible for CTF2 support will be informed about the timing of these webinars, recordings of which are available on the CTF2 website as well.

In 2022, the CTF2 conducted a mid-term evaluation, which confirmed the relevance and effectiveness of CTF2 operations to date and produced recommendations to ensure a more targeted support to eligible countries. The CTF is working towards formalizing proposed modifications to the operations of the CTF2, the results of which will be communicated in due course.

After two years of reduced activities due to the limitations imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic, activities under the CTF2 accelerated significantly in 2022.

The Republic of Syria was granted conditional approval on the project "Strengthening the national Codex Alimentarius program in Syria", which was subject to revision and is now being considered for support pending final adaptations to the project.

In terms of planned activities, support to Yemen through a set of activities to improve the national food safety system is being resumed (July- October 2023), and the CTF application is one of them.

2.9   WHO Food safety emergency preparedness and response activities in the Region

To enhance the application of the Codex principles and guidelines for exchanging information in food safety emergencies and further minimize potential adverse public health effects. The WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, in collaboration with the US CDC, INFOSAN and WHO collaborating Centers in the Region (the Lebanese Republic and the Sultanate of Oman), delivered a regional training on foodborne diseases outbreak investigation to ten countries in 2021. Followed by a series of national trainings on foodborne disease surveillance and response to the Republic of the Sudan, the Syrian Arab Republic, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the State of Qatar in 2022. The training packages were tailored to national context and in alignment with the Codex Guidelines on the management of biological foodborne outbreaks (CXG 96-2022).

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[7] https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb5545en (also available in Arabic)

3   Global initiatives and programmes of relevance to the region

3.1   World Food Safety Day

Codex Members from the region continue to use the occasion of World Food Safety Day (WFSD) on 7 June to raise awareness about food safety and promoting solutions on how to prevent foodborne illness. A wide variety of engagements are showcased on the dedicated Codex Alimentarius WFSD website[8].

3.2   Food Control Assessment Tool published in Arabic and online platform

The food control system of each country is key in advancing a country's public health and economic development. To achieve their intended goal they need to work effectively and consistently across all their parts. Through assessment, countries can ensure that their food control systems are operating efficiently throughout the entire food chain.

FAO, together with WHO, created a unique assessment tool in 2019 to monitor and evaluate the performance of a national food control system and identify areas for improvement. Conducting an assessment process supports countries to comply with internationally recognized food safety standards and increase competitiveness while protecting the health of consumers.

The FAO and WHO Food Control System Assessment Tool[9,10] was published in Arabic in 2020.

Members are encouraged to contribute to the online platform for information sharing on food control systems and roles and responsibilities in food safety as. This platform was developed by FAO and WHO with support of the Codex Secretariat in response to the request of CAC38[11]. Certain members have contributed to this useful site[12].

4   INFOSAN

4.1   Global Meeting December 2019 Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE)

The Second Global Meeting of INFOSAN was held from 9-11 December 2019 in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and attended by more than 285 participants from 135 countries. His Excellency Dr Thani Ahmed Al Zeyoudi, Minister of Climate Change and Environment, inaugurated the meeting which was organized by FAO and WHO and the Abu Dhabi Agriculture and Food Safety Authority (ADAFSA). The meeting was held at the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre under the patronage of His Excellency Sheikh Mansour bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, Deputy Prime Minister of the UAE, Minister of Presidential Affairs and Chairman of ADAFSA. After nearly 10 years since the first global meeting, the purpose of this meeting was to bring members together to discuss recent network developments, to strengthen relationships, to exchange experiences and inspire actions to strengthen INFOSAN in the future. The report[13] summarizes the discussions and underlines the highlights.

5   FAO and WHO Food Safety Strategies

5.1   FAO

Elaborated at the request of the 27th Session of the Committee on Agriculture[14], the FAO Strategic Priorities for Food Safety within the FAO Strategic Framework 2022-31[15] were endorsed by the FAO Council in December 2022. These Strategic Priorities are articulated around four interconnected Strategic Outcomes focused on governance, scientific advice, strengthening national food control systems and fostering public–private partnerships along the food chain. They result from an iterative consultative process led by FAO with its Members and international partner organizations, including, notably WHO.

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[8] https://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/committees/codex-regions/ccne/about/en/
[9] https://www.fao.org/food-safety/food-control-systems/assessment-tool/en/
[10] https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240028371
[11] https://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/sh-proxy/en/?lnk=1&url=https%253A%252F%252Fworkspace.fao.org%252Fsites%252Fcodex%252FMeetings%252FCX-701-38%252FReport%252FREP15_CACe.pdf
[12] https://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/about-codex/members/detail/en/c/15611/
[13] https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en?details=ca8587en%2f
[14] Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). 2020. *Report of the 27th Session of the Committee on Agriculture (28 September - 2 October 2020)* https://www.fao.org/3/ne021en/ne021en.pdf
[15] https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cc4040en

The FAO Strategic Priorities for Food Safety 2022–2031 encourage a more consistent integration of food safety into the development of sustainable and inclusive agrifood systems, food security and nutrition policies, and agriculture development strategies. FAO expects the Strategic Priorities for Food Safety to act as an instrument that will spur investments to strengthen food safety, to enhance effective participation in food safety standards-setting and to secure adequate human and financial resources for FAO to successfully implement its food safety programme and to provide international guidance, policy and advocacy for policymakers.

5.2   WHO

In May 2022, the seventy-fifth World Health Assembly adopted a WHO Global strategy for food safety. The strategy[16] was developed by the WHO in cooperation with the FAO and WOAH on request from the World Health Assembly in 2020 to address current and emerging food safety challenges and include innovative approaches for strengthening national food safety systems. The strategy aims to serve as a blueprint and guidance for the Member States in their efforts to strengthen their national food safety systems and promote regional and global cooperation. The strategy was developed through a consultative process with input from a technical advisory group on food safety, two high-level international food safety conferences, and Member States consultations.

The strategy consists of five interlinked and mutually supportive strategic priorities to accelerate global efforts in food safety. Implementation of the strategy would rely on the commitment and efforts of Member States, WHO, and the international community. WHO will, together with other international and regional partners, support Member States by providing global leadership and fostering policy dialogues among stakeholders; synthesizing evidence and generating normative guidance in food safety; enhancing technical cooperation and building stronger capacities for countries; and strengthening partnerships and fostering global collaboration.

6   Recommendations

-    Members are encouraged to share information and updates on their concerns relating to the following issues:
     -    Chemical food contamination and exposure monitoring
     -    Weakness of food control system / legal framework
     -    Antimicrobial resistance
     -    Management of innovation / novel food
     -    Food fraud
-    Members are also encouraged to suggest follow-up actions to address emerging issues.
-    Members from the regions interested in sharing updates on their national food control systems on the dedicated online platform (example entry[17]) are invited to liaise with the Codex Secretariat

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[16] WHO global strategy for food safety 2022-2030: towards stronger food safety systems and global cooperation: https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240057685
[17] https://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/about-codex/members/detail/en/c/15611/

7   Materials from FAO and WHO available in Arabic

The following list of recently published technical food safety and food control materials in Arabic language:

Topic	Title	Link(s)
Engagement in Codex	Regional Guide for Effective Engagement in Codex Work	- https://www.fao.org/publications/card/en/c/ca7200ar
Foodborne disease	Estimating the burden of foodborne diseases: a practical handbook for countries; Executive Summary and modules available in Arabic	- https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240012264
Food Control System Assessment	FAO and WHO Food Control System Assessment Tool	- https://www.fao.org/food-safety/food-control-systems/assessment-tool/en/ - https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789240028371
INFOSAN	The INFOSAN members guide: template for INFOSAN / IHR communication	- http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/337469/9789240016590-ara.pdf?sequence=5
Management of Foodborne outbreaks	Guidelines on the Management of Biological Foodborne Outbreaks	- https://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/sh-proxy/en/?lnk=1&url=https%253A%252F%252Fworkspace.fao.org%252Fsites%252Fcodex%252FStandards%252FCXG%2B96-2022%252FCXG_096a.pdf
Risk assessment	In brief: Assessing the risk of microbiological hazards in foods	- https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/CB4709EN - https://www.who.int/publications/m/item/in-brief-assessing-the-riskof-microbiological-hazards-in-foods
Risk assessment	Infographic: Microbiological Risk Assessment (MRA) for Food	- https://www.fao.org/3/cb5037ar/cb5037ar.pdf - https://www.who.int/multi-media/details/microbilogical-risk-assessment-(mra)-for-food