CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION **E**

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

World Health Organization

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JOINT FAO/WHO FOOD STANDARDS PROGRAMME

FAO/WHO COORDINATING COMMITTEE FOR THE NEAR EAST

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FOOD SAFETY AND QUALITY SITUATION IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE REGION: CURRENT AND EMERGING ISSUES IN THE REGION

(Prepared by FAO and WHO)

1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1.   Problems related to the food environment and food safety issues are by nature dynamic and increasingly important and require Member States to identify and address such issues in a timely and effective manner. These issues may include well-known, persistent critical food safety issues that require immediate action, as well as, emerging ones. The 70th session of the Executive Committee of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CCEXEC70) stressed the importance of identifying emerging issues and defining priorities among them (REP 15/EXEC). Regional Coordinating Committees (RCCs) were identified as key in catalyzing this process. It was further noted that undertaking such a function required strengthening the RCCs.

1.2.   CCEXEC70 and the Codex Alimentarius Commission at its 38th session (CAC38) requested FAO and WHO, in collaboration with the Codex Secretariat and the Regional Coordinators, to develop a set of questions on needs and priorities in the region and to analyze the information collected for presentation at the next round of RCCs.

1.3.   This was done in preparation of the 9th session of CCNE and there was consensus that the two key issues most important to the Member States of the region were food contamination and weak national food control system infrastructure. Due to the low response rate in the 2017 survey and in an attempt to strengthen countries' ownership and get higher response rate Codex Contact Points were encouraged to organize consultations at national level to collect multiple stakeholders' inputs to the questionnaire. In addition, FAO and WHO :

 (i)   refocused the questionnaire only on emerging issues (as the difference between emerging and critical issues were not always well perceived);

 (ii) simplified the survey;

 (iii) changed the modality (using survey monkey, instead of email exchanges); and

 (iv) involved Regional Coordinators as the prime initiators and analysts of the information.

1.4.   This document presents an analysis of the responses to this second questionnaire on emerging food safety and quality issues.

1.5.   The objective is to help countries and regions to proactively identify prospective issues that could be of significance and lead to concrete actions where necessary.

2. METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH TO THE SURVEY

2.1.   An identical questionnaire prepared by FAO/WHO was sent to the Codex Contact Points of all Members from the region with the request to indicate what they consider to be the most important emerging issues in food safety and quality.

2.2.   Member countries were asked to provide the three most important emerging issues in food safety and quality, supported by a rationale (why the issue was selected; expected and /or actual impact of the issue). Members were also asked to indicate the process by which they had come to the identification of these issues, in particular who had been involved in these discussions.

2.3.   Definitions of the key terms used in the questionnaire were provided: issues and emerging issues (see Table 1).

Table 1: Key terms in the questionnaire on emerging food safety and quality issues.

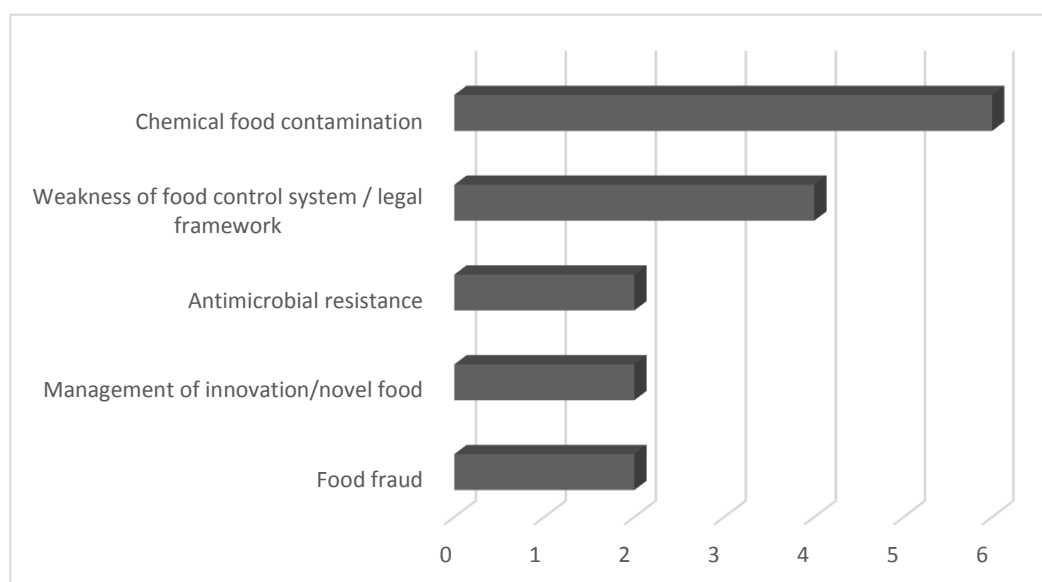| Key terms	Definition
Issues	With the word *issues, it usually refers to* hazards/challenges, but also opportunities or trends that might have an impact on food safety and quality.
Emerging issues	Those that are new or unexpected. Although their effect is currently not necessarily being experienced, these issues may cause a change in the status quo. Identification of these issues will help provide proactive guidance and support to counties in addressing prospective issues that could be of regulatory significance.

3. RESPONDENT COUNTRIES AND ANALYSIS OF RESULTS

3.1.   Nine out of the 17 Member countries have completed the survey (see Table 2). This corresponds to an increased rate of 53 percent compared to 35 percent obtained during the last survey. This improvement is the result of several follow-ups and/or direct support provided to Members. Further effort should be made to increase the understanding of emerging issues and the rationale supporting the identification of these issues.

Table 2: Participating Countries

Kingdom of Bahrain	Lebanese Republic
Arab Republic of Egypt	State of Libya
Islamic Republic of Iran	Republic of the Sudan
Republic of Iraq	United Arab Emirates
State of Kuwait	

3.2.   Figure 1 presents the major emerging issues reported in the survey and Appendix I provides a more detailed summary of answers related to the top ranking emerging issues. Five issues have been mentioned twice or more, with chemical food contamination (6), and weakness of national food control systems (4) ranking in first and second position.

Figure 1: Frequency of major emerging issues in Food Safety and Quality

3.3.   Other categories mentioned only once in the questionnaire, and therefore not reported in Figure 1 were:

  (i) General standards for food additives;

  (ii) Climate change;

  (iii) Regulation of Food Contact Materials (FCM);

  (iv) Rapid Alert System for food safety;

  (v) New distribution channels e.g. internet food trade;

  (vi) Food rumors spread;

  (vii) Artificial intelligence;

 (viii) Genetically Modified Organisms (GMO);

  (ix) Food commodities standards.

4. CONCLUSIONS

4.1.   The simplified process and other measures seem to have had a positive impact on the response rate by countries. However, there is still room for progress, in particular with regard to ownership.

4.2.   The issue of chemical food contamination (Aflatoxin, heavy metals, emerging pollutants, veterinary drug residues, pesticides residues, etc.) has been identified by the respondent countries as the greatest concern. A better involvement in the work of Codex Committees on food contaminants and pesticide residues, supported by data provision from the countries in the region would allow better risk assessment and management of chemical contamination of foods in the Near East.

4.3.   The issue of weak national food control systems or some of the competencies related to the regulatory framework, inter-sectoral collaboration, and food import control function, remain challenges in the region. TheFAO/WHO national food control systems assessment tool recently on-line in English language discusses various elements of the food control system(FAO Food safety and quality series, issue n. 7.1[1]) The FAO/WHO assessment tool can be used to better identify the specific capacity development needs to be addressed. The upcoming publication of the FAO/WHO food control system assessment tool in Arabic language will be an asset for Arabic-speaking countries in the Near East region and facilitate its use by the food safety competent authorities. This publication showcase among others the antimicrobial resistance (AMR) underlying the need for countries to improve the adoption of One Health approaches in the development of their national food control systems.

4.4.   Two countries identified antimicrobial resistance, management of innovation/novel food and food fraud as emerging issues.

4.5.   In order to obtain detailed responses that are deemed useful to shape FAO and WHO's capacity development and support programmes and feed into the Codex Strategic Plan 2020-2025, the importance of the national consultation process and public-private policy dialogue should not be underestimated.

5. RECOMMENDATION

5.1.   Further efforts should be made to increase the understanding of emerging issues in Near East countries and the rationale supporting the identification of these issues as well as to increase the response rate.

5.2.   Members from the region are invited to continue improving the survey process, make the results more specific to feed into the Codex Strategic Plan 2020-2025 and approach of FAO and WHO capacity development programmes.

5.3.   Feedback from respondent countries on emerging issues in the region provided through the consultation with different national stakeholders, as well the approaches followed to ensure these consultations take place, should be shared to encourage, stimulate and help non-respondent countries to organize and engage in such discussions in preparation for the 11th session of CCNE.

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[1] http:/www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca5334en
A: http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca5336en
B: http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca5346en
C: http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca5348en
D: http://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/ca5404en

Excerpt from the survey

Category	Description of the problem
Chemical food contamination	- Aflatoxin contamination is a continuous food safety issue; - As a result of the change in the world's lifestyle and the industrial revolution, we are witnessing the emergence of new strains of bacteria, new chemicals and other pollutants that have not been studied before; - Mycotoxins in animal feed, such as total Aflatoxines, Ochratoxin, T2 toxine. Aflatoxins M1 (AFM1) in milk and milk products; - When checking agricultural products (vegetables and fruits) imported or cultivated in the country, the detected high levels of pesticide residues make the food unfit for human consumption; - Need for routine food safety surveys such as monitoring the residues of veterinary drugs in animal products, pesticide residues in local agricultural products and food additives; - The control of chemical hazards have improved in the recent decade, but chemical hazards such as pesticide residues, veterinary drugs, mycotoxins and heavy metals remain a concern for both consumers and food safety experts, due to challenges in the infrastructure of the national food safety system. - In order to promote fair trade among the countries of the region, concerns about food safety assurance need to be eliminated. Additionally, the control measures that have been implemented may need to be reviewed.
Weakness of food control systems / legal framework	- There is no overarching law that clearly describes the roles and responsibilities of each competent authority working in food control; - The majority of relevant food control legislations does not refer to risk-based or through-production chain food control; - Control of chemical hazards remain a concern for both consumers and food safety experts, due to challenges in infrastructure in the national food safety system. Therefore, in order to promote fair trade among the countries in the region, concerns and safety assurance should be eliminated. Additionally, the control measures that have been implemented may need to be reviewed; - Need to review national laws and regulations related to food safety, food control systems, and development/upgrade of the infrastructure of food control centers; - The country does not adopt a risk-based approach for food import control, which affects the movement of traded food.
Antimicrobial resistance	- Antimicrobial resistance (AMR) is a major global threat and has implications for both food safety and food security. Food plays an important role in the development and spread of AMR. The presence of AMR microorganisms in food chains is a potential route of exposure for everyone; - Antimicrobial resistance in food of plant origin.
Management of innovation/novel food	- Novel food regulations are being developed or updated in several jurisdictions. These regulations are meant to accompany changes in food production practices (through the development of novel processes of production) and/or to introduce novel ingredients, some of which were not edible in the given geography. Safety assessment requirements for novel foods (other than those developed as a result of Genetic Modification) are not standardized and would benefit from added guidance at the international level. Similarly, the concept of food novelty and the way it is regulated, with added scrutiny leading to a stronger pre-market oversight, needs to be better standardized at the international level, to limit the level of discrepancy at the international level; - The acceleration and development of science in our time and the accompanying technological progress has led to the introduction of new products in the market, which makes it difficult to control their safety. Lack of legislation governing control over these products increasingly present in the market, especially as there are continuous adjustments/technological improvement to the traditional products is a challenge.
Food fraud	- As a result of an increased demand for food by consumers and an increased interest for economic profit by suppliers, there is a rapid development in practices related to food fraud that may have a negative impact on food safety, thus changing the intrinsic characteristics of the final food product; - Food Integrity has three dimensions: (i) quality, which includes the nutritional properties, (ii) safety, and (iii) authenticity, which is less widely considered. Food authenticity control can diminish the threat resulting from the adulteration of food by using cheaper ingredients for the main purpose of economic gain. Food authenticity tests can act as reliable protective measures for future cases of food fraud, and food safety risks that might arise from online retailers too.