World Health Organization

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON NUTRITION (ICN2)

FOOD SAFETY SIDE EVENT

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RED ROOM

FOOD SAFETY: A RIGHT OR A PRIVILEGE

UNDERSTANDING THE IMPORTANCE OF FOOD SAFETY TO THE FOOD SECURITY AND NUTRITION AGENDA

Food security is commonly understood as the state when all people at all times have physical, social and economic access to **sufficient**, **nutritious** and **safe** food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life. Conceptually, food security is built upon four pillars including food availability, access, utilization and stability. Within this framework, food safety is often wrongly assumed as a given. However, in places where food supplies are insufficient, coping mechanisms to address food insecurity are often primarily focused on access to food without due considerations for safety. Even in more food-secure countries, limited resources are diverted to ensure the safety of exported food products at the expense of food sold domestically. Individuals facing food insecurity are vulnerable to chemical, biological and other hazards in unsafe foods, which can pose serious, acute and chronic health risks (ranging from diarrhoea to cancer and even death).

Furthermore, food safety problems threaten the nutritional status of particularly vulnerable sub-populations such as older adults, pregnant women and children. Foodborne illness resulting in chronic diarrhoea can negatively impact on nutritional status by reducing nutrient absorption and exacerbating nutrient deficiencies. Limited access to safe and nutritionally adequate food often forms a vicious cycle of worsening health and well-being. Beyond the direct effects on health, unsafe food imposes significant social and economic costs resulting from loss of income and reduced market access.

Morbidity due to diarrhoea, dysentery and other enteric diseases – arising from unsafe food, contaminated water and poor sanitation – has not declined much over recent decades. An estimated 2 million people per year die from diarrhoeal diseases from contaminated food and water, most of them children. In addition, many children in developing countries are chronically exposed through their diets to aflatoxins, which are not only carcinogenic but may also contribute to stunting. It has been estimated that aflatoxin may play a causative role in up to 30% of the cases of liver cancer globally each year.

KEY MESSAGES

- Access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food is a basic human necessity, required to sustain life and promote good health.

- Food safety, nutrition and food security are inextricably linked, yet the importance of food safety in this relationship is often overlooked.

- Improved food safety will contribute to improved nutritional status and the reduction and prevention of non-communicable diseases, including cancer.

- An integrated approach is needed where food safety and nutrition are systematically introduced into mainstream food system policies and interventions worldwide in order to achieve health and development goals.

- Unsafe food imposes significant social and economic costs resulting from loss of income and reduced market access.

- Recommended actions to address food safety at national levels should be prioritized and implemented.

Food safety is an essential component of sustainable agricultural and economic development and global health. This is especially relevant as the international community focusses on the Millennium Development Goals and the post 2015 Agenda. Food safety needs to be integrated into the global food security and nutrition agenda to reach these Goals.

Food safety is not a given. Guaranteeing the safety and quality of food supplies should be considered as important as ensuring adequate distribution of food among all people to eliminate hunger globally.

Governments should provide an enabling policy and regulatory environment, and establish, implement and enforce effective food safety systems to ensure that food producers and suppliers along the whole food chain operate responsibly and supply safe food to consumers. The key elements of effective food safety systems include monitoring the safety of domestic and imported food supplies, and building capacity to prevent, detect and respond to foodborne disease outbreaks.

In the last 70 years, 335 new infectious diseases have been identified including foodborne ones, of which one third are linked to changes in agriculture and food production. The food safety context is therefore continuously evolving, with an increasing demand for food to support a growing global population alongside efforts to develop sustainable food production practices. One emerging food safety issue of global concern is antimicrobial resistance (AMR). While antimicrobial drugs are essential for both human and animal health and welfare, and critical to food producers' livelihoods, their misuse has led to growing antimicrobial resistance threats to humans and agro-ecological environments. Addressing AMR therefore requires a multisectoral "One Health" approach, but significant challenges still remain in translating internationally recognized standards and guidelines into appropriate policies and actions at a national level.

FOOD SAFETY AT FAO AND WHO
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RECOMMENDED ACTIONS ON FOOD SAFETY

1. Develop, establish, enforce and strengthen, as appropriate, food control systems, including reviewing and modernizing national food safety legislation and regulations to ensure that food producers and suppliers throughout the food chain operate responsibly

2. Actively take part in the work of the Codex Alimentarius Commission on nutrition and food safety, and implement, as appropriate, internationally adopted standards at the national level

3. Participate in and contribute to international networks to exchange food safety information, including for managing emergencies (i.e. International Food Safety Authorities Network, INFOSAN)

4. Raise awareness among relevant stakeholders on the problems posed by AMR, and implement appropriate multisectoral measures to address AMR including prudent use of antimicrobials in veterinary and human medicine

5. Develop and implement national guidelines on prudent use of antimicrobials in food-producing animals according to internationally recognized standards adopted by competent international organizations to reduce non-therapeutic use of antimicrobials and to phase out the use of antimicrobials as growth promoters in the absence of risk analysis as describe in Codex Code of Practice CAC/RCP61-2005