



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
ORGANIZATION
OF THE UNITED NATIONS



AC/INF 6

FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for the Americas and the Caribbean

Summary Report of the Briefing Meeting
Rome, 7 July 2005

1. Opening of the meeting

A briefing meeting for the FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for the Americas and the Caribbean was held in Rome, on the occasion of the 28th Session of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, on 7 July 2005. The meeting was attended by 27 participants; representing 17 countries of the Americas and the Caribbean (see List of Participants in Annex 1). Mr Ezzeddine Boutrif, Chief of the FAO Food Quality and Standards Service, welcomed the delegates on behalf of FAO and WHO. He recalled the initiative of FAO and WHO to convene regional conferences on food safety in all the regions of the world, the previous discussions held regarding this conference and the decision made by the Directors-General of FAO and WHO to have Costa Rica host the conference. The participants were reminded that the meeting was being held to update the representatives of the region regarding the status of preparations for the conference and to seek the views and recommendations of the delegates regarding the content, practical organization and budget of the conference.

2. Update on preparations for the conference

Ms Maya Pineiro, FAO secretariat for the conference, presented the provisional agenda and timetable of the conference, as well as the suggestion for all countries to implement national preparatory task forces for conference preparation, as included in the meeting working document made available to all participants prior to the meeting. It was also noted that Costa Rica, the host country for the conference, had actively begun preparations for the local details of the conference.

It was emphasized that the preparatory meeting, as well as the conference itself was separate from the Codex system and would address different issues than those discussed in Codex. The FAO/WHO secretariat confirmed that the conference would cover food safety issues in general and that the intent of the conference is to provide a stimulus for the region to work together to share ideas and resources to improve food safety. The meeting stressed that the conference should not only exchange information, but that it should also discuss practical and specific solutions to the real problems and concerns of the region.

3. Status of the discussion papers for the conference

The secretariat noted that the main themes and sub-points for each paper, as indicated in Annex 3 of the working document, had been agreed by the previous briefing meeting with delegates attending the 27th Session of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (July 2004).

Delegates provided valuable feedback and suggested other important issues of concern to the region, as reflected in the revised conference objectives and themes (Annex 2). These changes will also be reflected in the agenda and programme of the conference. Delegates also raised many points of

interest which were already reflected in the themes of the conference, but which should be explicitly included in the conference papers or could be covered in the Working Groups.

In particular, the following additional themes were discussed:

- The importance of the issue of “globalization”/international trade/free trade agreements, as well as the repercussions of trade measures on human and plant health issues, was underlined. It was also discussed that the term “multi-lateral trade agreements” could be used rather than the term “globalization”.
- It was also suggested that an additional agenda item could be included on the importance of effective national data collection systems, so that this data can be used to reliably establish contaminant levels and other such regulations.

The meeting discussed the importance of the countries of the region contributing to the working documents for the conference. Countries were encouraged to take the lead in preparing one of the papers for the conference in order to foster a sense of regional “ownership” of the conference. Some participants at the meeting noted that they would need to speak to officials in their home country regarding their further input to the paper and other countries offered to provide input to various papers. The FAO/WHO secretariat will directly contact countries to ask them to take the lead in preparation of one of the documents. It was also noted that FAO and WHO would provide information, including that from other countries of the region, as well as other assistance and direction to the authors of the papers. The FAO/WHO Secretariat, especially the regional and sub-regional officers, could also prepare discussion papers as necessary and appropriate.

It was discussed that the documents should provide a summary of the situation in the entire region, rather than only the situation in one country, and include recommendations and points for discussion during the conference. The need for the papers and the working group discussions to make specific proposals in a proactive manner, rather than to only provide information was emphasized.

It was noted that FAO and WHO would send letters to the FAO/WHO representation in each country to invite all countries to contribute information for the main working documents of the conference (Themes A-F in Annex 2). In addition to inputs to the main working documents for the conference (to be sent to the FAO/WHO secretariat by 30 August 2005), whose preparation will be led by one of the countries of the region or the FAO/WHO secretariat as appropriate; all countries were encouraged to prepare Conference Room Documents (CRDs) related to the main themes of the conference, as well as on other subjects related to food safety which are of interest to the countries of the region. The guidelines for the preparation of CRDs will be sent with the letters to the FAO and WHO representatives of the region and will be posted on the conference website, once the website is ready. CRDs should be submitted to the FAO/WHO secretariat by 1 November 2005.

In addition to the countries of the region, other organizations were also welcomed to provide input to the conference papers and to the conference side events. The organizations mentioned include IICA, Consumers International, other NGOs such as ALA, and the Caribbean Agricultural Research Agency.

The Food Safety Institute of the Americas, a new branch of the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) in Miami, Florida, also indicated its willingness to provide information to the conference and that it would further discuss its involvement with the FAO/WHO secretariat. It was also noted that the Institute is currently surveying all food safety education programmes in place in the region, as well as the needs of the region in this area. The Director of the Institute indicated that this information would contribute to the development of a strategic plan for the Institute, which is planned to be launched at a meeting in September or October 2005 that all the countries of the region, FAO and WHO are welcome to attend.

Specific comments on each of the themes for the conference were provided as follows:

Theme A: National food safety systems in the Americas and the Caribbean - a situation analysis

The meeting noted that this theme required input from member countries, and that FAO/WHO would send out a circular letter, requesting national governments to submit national situation papers to the FAO/WHO secretariat by 30 August 2005. The FAO/WHO secretariat will also take into account country papers presented in other venues, such as GF-1 and GF-2, in the synthesis of this information. It was noted that countries could provide national food safety situation papers that were prepared for other events as input for this paper. The FAO/WHO regional offices will lead in the preparation of this paper.

Theme B: Improving the effectiveness of national food control systems in the Americas and the Caribbean

It was noted that this paper should utilize input from the paper on national food safety systems (Theme A) and that the modernization of national food control systems should be addressed in this paper. The secretariat will formally approach Canada to lead in the preparation of this paper. Other countries with successful experiences in this area are encouraged to also share relevant information with the author of the paper. Some countries offered to provide information in this regard. This theme could also be further discussed in one of the working groups, if agreed by the countries of the region.

Theme C: Assuring food safety at the production/processing level

Cuba offered to provide information on its experiences with drinks and fisheries products for this paper.

Theme D: International and regional cooperation in food safety

In addition to the points mentioned in the general discussion above, the need for the more developed countries to help the lesser-developed countries in the region was also emphasized.

Theme E: Technical Issues of Regional Concern

The importance of sharing successful experiences in risk analysis, included as one of these topics, was noted. Other themes, such as the importance of data collection, could be included under this topic. Countries are encouraged to volunteer or will be approached to lead in the preparation of separate papers for each of the sub- topics listed in Annex 2.

Each of these issues will be addressed in a short (3000 words) paper and presented in a short time frame (15 min). Some of these themes could also be addressed in the Working Groups.

Theme F: The consumer- active participation in food safety communication

The meeting noted that the regional Consumers International office had offered to prepare this paper and that national consumer organizations should send their national information to the author of the paper to accurately reflect the situation in the entire region.

The FAO/WHO secretariat will formally approach the proposed author countries to request the first draft of these working papers (approximately 5000 words) to be received by FAO by 30 September 2005.

Working group discussions

The meeting noted that the two parallel working groups (WG) are scheduled to meet in two sessions. It was noted that the WG discussions could be used to address themes of particular cross-subject concern and that the groups should make specific proposals for actions that the region should take to improve food safety in the region. The WG discussions could be based on information presented in the discussion papers, or on separately prepared background papers, as appropriate. The following theme was proposed for the working group, with the other theme to be suggested by the countries of the region:

- 1) The impact of multi-lateral trade agreements and trade measures on food safety, human and plant health; (*Chile would be willing to help draft this paper*)
- 2) *To be suggested by the countries of the region*

4. Proposals for side events during the conference

The secretariat indicated that the side events are intended to provide an opportunity for consumer, industry, or other groups to present their experiences related to food safety. It was noted that the side events would cover topics separate from the main themes of the conference. The side events could occur during lunch breaks and immediately after the sessions, so that the report writing day could potentially be free for field trips, tours of factories, research institutions, tourist attractions, etc.

The Secretariat will include a call on the conference website for interested organizations to propose the complete organization of side events on food safety related topics. The details of the side events will be finalized between the FAO/WHO secretariat and the host government in due course.

5. Establishment of national task forces for conference preparation

The FAO/WHO secretariat indicated that it would send letters to the FAO and WHO representatives in the region to request them to contact the national governments to establish national task forces for conference preparation as proposed in Annex 4 of the meeting working document.

6. Status of funding for the conference

The FAO/WHO secretariat indicated that it had recently sent out letters to donors, requesting support for the conference, but that no response had been received to date. It was noted that adequate funds have been secured to organize the conference, including translation, interpretation, and other related expenses, but funds are needed to assist participants from both the health and agriculture sectors of the low income countries of the region to participate.

7. Other matters of information

The meeting noted that the dates of the conference (6-9 December 2005) will be re-checked to ensure that no other important Codex meetings (such as CCFICS) will be taking place at the same time.

Although not discussed due to lack of time, the Secretariat would like to draw the attention of the meeting to the following items:

- The conference will be held in English and in Spanish, which are the official languages of FAO for the region.

- The secretariat is considering potential keynote speakers who would attract the attention of the media and the general public and will accept suggestions accordingly.
- The secretariat will work with the host country to finalize other logistical details for the conference.

The meeting was closed at 13:45 hours on 7 July 2005.

**BRIEFING MEETING FOR THE FAO/WHO REGIONAL CONFERENCE
ON FOOD SAFETY FOR THE AMERICAS AND THE CARIBBEAN**

12:30 hours, 7 July 2005, Plenary Hall, FAO Headquarters

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FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for the Americas and the Caribbean
San José, Costa Rica, 6-9 December 2005

Revised objectives and themes

1. Objectives of the Conference

The over-arching goal of this Regional Conference on Food Safety for the Americas and the Caribbean is to improve the safety of food produced and consumed in the region. Specifically, this Conference will work to:

- Facilitate discussion on food safety issues important to all countries of the Americas and the Caribbean and identify practical and sustainable actions to address these issues;
- Identify opportunities for improving regional cooperation in promoting food safety to protect human health and increase food trade opportunities, taking into account the prevailing conditions in agriculture, post-harvest operations, food processing, food trade, public health and consumer protection;
- Promote the strengthening and/or the establishment of regional networks for the exchange of food safety-related information and experiences among all stakeholders;
- Encourage public/private partnerships for consumer and industry awareness raising and capacity building in food safety;
- Promote improved interaction between academia, research organizations and other food safety officials.

2. Draft themes of the Conference

A) National food safety systems in the Americas and the Caribbean – a situation analysis

Author: FAO/WHO regional offices

- Discussion paper - overview of food safety systems in selected countries from different sub-regions of the Americas and the Caribbean covering the following points:
 - Legal framework, including basic laws, enabling regulations and appropriate implementation mechanisms;
 - Food standards and technical regulations;
 - Food-borne disease surveillance systems;
 - Coordination of activities of all organizations involved in food safety management;
 - Laboratory support services for all relevant food hazards;
 - Food inspection and enforcement mechanisms, at both domestic and international levels;
 - Food sampling and analytical procedures
 - Product recall and re-export procedures;
 - Capacity for training in food safety matters;
 - Public/private partnerships for on-going training of food control and food industry officials and for consumer awareness raising;
 - Communication among all stakeholders;
 - Challenges faced and approaches used to effectively overcome challenges;
 - Extent of the use of the food chain approach (primary production, processing, distribution, etc).

- Each participating country will prepare and make available a Conference Room Document outlining its national food safety situation, including the above components.

B) Improving the effectiveness of national food control systems in the Americas and the Caribbean

Possible author: Canada

- Harmonization of food safety standards and regulations with Codex;
- Strengthening food inspection systems;
- Risk-based food safety policy for food imports and domestic production;
- Enhancing the capacities of food control laboratories and networking for laboratory accreditation;
- Equivalence of food control systems; mutual recognition of certifications;
- Involvement of stakeholders in food control management and decision-making;
- Developing a national strategy for a modern food control system;
- Development of a framework to deal with food safety emergency situations;
- Collaboration and interaction of food safety- related services at the national level;
- Mechanism to assess the function of these services;
- Costs and benefits of modernizing food control systems;
- Prioritizing resources.
- Monitoring of food safety in primary health care facilities

C) Assuring food safety at the production/processing level

- Application of appropriate quality assurance schemes (GAP/GMP/HACCP; “best practices”);
- Controlling the safety of foods produced by small and medium-sized enterprises;
- Street food safety.

D) International and regional cooperation in food safety

- INFAL/RIILAA – Regional network of food analysis laboratories;
- Need for establishing a regional network for food safety information and communication, including in emergency situations;
- Public/private partnerships in capacity building for all stakeholders involved in food safety, at the regional and international levels;
- Networking with other regional and national activities and in public/private partnerships to increase effectiveness;
- Fostering technical assistance among countries within the region;
- International and regional harmonization of food safety standards;
- International and regional cooperation between food safety, animal and plant health officials.
- Multi-lateral trade issues
- Impact of international agreements on food trade/ food safety issues

E) Technical issues of regional concern

- Traceability – application in key commodities;
 - Objectives of traceability programmes
 - Equivalence considerations of the different systems available

- Foods derived from modern biotechnology;
- Risk analysis- sharing successful national experiences.
- Effective food safety-related data collection systems
 - Needed to establish realistic contaminant, residue and related regulations

F) The consumer: active participation in food safety communication
Possible author: Mr José Vargas Niello (consint@consint.cl) of Consumers International.