



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE  
ORGANIZATION  
OF THE UNITED NATIONS



WORLD  
HEALTH  
ORGANIZATION

**E**

**Agenda Item 4.4 a)**

**GF/CRD China-4**

**ORIGINAL LANGUAGE**

## **FAO/WHO GLOBAL FORUM OF FOOD SAFETY REGULATORS**

*Marrakech, Morocco, 28 – 30 January 2002*

### **THE PARTICIPATION OF CONSUMERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS IN FOOD SAFETY ACTIVITIES IN CHINA**

*Country Paper proposed by China*

#### **ABSTRACT**

The Chinese government has fully realized that to enable the consumers, food industry and other stakeholders to learn about the current situation of food safety and to participate in food safety control activities is an efficient way of strengthening national food safety control system and improving the confidence of consumers to food safety. Based on this understanding, the Chinese government has adopted various measures and ways to promote the participation of all stakeholders, especially the consumers. These may include: participation of food industry associations and representatives in food standard and regulation drafting; paying high attention by governmental agencies at different levels to the complaints from consumers and to communications with industry on the complaints; release and dissemination of food safety information through different ways; implementing education program called “Food Hygiene Law Education Week” every year since 1996; and setting up close cooperation with the consumer organization.

However, we are also aware of the challenges we are facing and the problems we have. The participation of Chinese consumers in food safety control is still relatively not adequate, especially consumers in the rural areas. Most of the food industries in China are small and middle size business; there is a need to explore better ways to communicate with those small and middle size food industries. China is a big and diversified country, with significant differences in economic development, education levels, culture background and dietary habits among different regions. There is a need to find more efficient ways in participation and risk communication.

*The views expressed in the Global Forum documents are those of the author(s), and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of FAO or WHO. Designations employed and presentation of material do not imply the expression of any opinion on the part of FAO or WHO concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.*

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

Food safety regulations and risk management measures could be well implemented and enforced, only if consumers, food industry and other stakeholders of the society could fully understand those regulations and measures, and play active roles in the development and enforcement. The 5<sup>th</sup> Provision of the “Food Hygiene Law of the People’s Republic of China” stipulates: “The government encourages and protects the supervision of food safety by social bodies and individuals.” The 18<sup>th</sup> Provision of the same law stipulates; “ Food manufacturing and handling industries shall improve its food safety control system, assign full time or part time food safety control personnel, and strengthen the inspection of food products produced by the industry.” And the 33<sup>rd</sup> Provision stipulates: “health administrative departments have the responsibility of conducting food safety and nutrition education activities, and food safety evaluation; and releasing information on food safety.” The provisions ensure the participation of the whole society in food safety control activities.

The Ministry of Health and all local governments have put emphasis on

risk communication in the field of food safety, and have the view that the wide participation by the whole society enables the improvement of food safety from various aspects; the participation of food standard development by industry not only improves the feasibility in the enforcement of the standards, but also enables the industry in understanding the standards, so as to improve its manufacturing process and food safety control measures; the participation of consumers, NGOs, public media and other parts of the society facilitates the understanding of food safety, supervises industry in improving product quality and strengthens the food safety inspection and control by the government.

## **2. BRIEF ACCOUNT OF THE PARTICIPATION OF CONSUMERS AND OTHER STAKEHOLDERS IN FOOD SAFETY ACTIVITIES IN CHINA**

### **2.1 THE DEVELOPMENT OF FOOD REGULATIONS AND STANDARDS**

Food industry associations and representatives are invited to participate in food standard drafting. During the process, meetings are convened by regulatory agencies of the Ministry of Health to collect comments on the drafted regulations and standards from related government agencies as well as industry representatives. For some critical issues in the relevant regulations, such as the use of food additives, the control of novo foods, the control of infant foods, imported food control, and the application of GMP and HACCP, special meetings are conducted to collect advice and comments from the industries. In the Food Hygiene Standard Expert Committee and the Technical Committee on Food Additive Standardization, in addition to experts from health, drug administration, chemical industry and light industry sectors, also invited are experts from food industry associations and individual industries. Representatives from industries are usually invited to participate in the whole process of developing, drafting and reviewing regulations and standards related to the hygienic code of practice of food manufacturing.

### **2.2 SUPERVISION AND INSPECTION**

Health administrative agencies at central and local levels pay high attention to the complaints from consumers and proper reply is sent to every complainer; and also pay attention to communications with industry on the complaints. For example, from January to September, 2001, the Ministry of Health received 156 letters from consumers, complained about the exaggeration in the functional food advertisements and some adverse effects after consuming some specific food products. The Ministry of Health took seriously about each letter. In respect to the issue of exaggeration in functional food advertisement, the Ministry of Health conducted three meetings with industry representatives, explaining relevant regulations and requirements on advertisement and asked industries to strengthen

self-control. At the same time, 27 examples of exaggerated advertisements were exposed through media, and relevant local governments were asked to make proper charges to the industries according to the Food Hygiene Law. Consumers were warned to pay attention to advertisement when purchasing functional food products. Government of all levels has set up a complaint reception system, announced phone numbers for complaining and dealt with a large number of complains from consumers.

### **2.3 THE RELEASE AND DISSEMINATION OF FOOD SAFETY INFORMATION**

1) To publish food regulations and standards timely, including web site releasing; organize food regulation and standard releasing meeting to disseminate information to consumer organizations and industry.

2) Serious food contamination accidents, large food poisoning outbreaks and food inspection results are announced by the Ministry of Health in the forms of press conference, public notice, etc. For example, three press conferences were held by the Ministry of Health between January and September, 2001, i.e. the release of inspection results on hygienic problems found in packaged cookies and cakes and functional foods on the market on March 15 (International Consumer Rights Protection day); the release of inspection results on child foods on the day before June 1 (International Children's day); and the release of progress on the on-going action of normalizing market situation of food products in July, including the information on 55 food poisoning outbreaks (9043 cases affected and 44 died) and the causes of these outbreaks. The communication of food safety information to the public is also carried out by local governments at all levels.

The dissemination of food safety information by modern media tools. All major comprehensive web sites in China publishes up-dated food safety information.

### **2.4 FOOD HYGIENE LAW EDUCATION WEEK**

Since 1995, the Ministry of Health has designated the first week of November in each year as the Food Hygiene Law Education Week, which has a specific theme for each year. The activities within the week include street consultation, knowledge competition, TV programs and meetings with industry, media and consumers. The past themes from 1996 to 2001 are: Eat hygienic food to maintain health; Hygienic eating utensils and hygienic kitchen; Prevent food poisoning; Prevent food poisoning in school population; Food safety and food trade; and Food safety needs the participation of consumers.

### **2.5 CLOSE COOPERATION WITH THE CONSUMER ORGANIZATION**

The Chinese Consumer Association was established in 1984. In the recent 17 years, local branches have been established gradually and the whole organization has played more and more important roles in the protection of consumer's rights and benefits, especially in food safety issues. In China, there are many ways that government and consumer organization work together. 1) exchange of information (newsletter, documents, etc.); 2) conduct food safety activities together, such as the March 15 and food hygiene education week activities; 3) government at all levels listen to the comments and advice from consumer associations; 4) governments receive and analyze complaining letters received by the consumer associations to improve food safety inspection and control. In recent years, more complaints on food have been received by the consumer associations, as compared with the earlier years, which indicates the concern of consumers to food safety. For example, between 1998 and 2000, the Chinese Consumer Association received 141,876, 146,646 and 139,424 complaints on food respectively, which accounted for about 20% of all complaints. Among them, about 40% were related to food quality. Most of these complaints were satisfactory solved by the joint efforts between the government and consumer association.

### **3. SUMMARY**

The Chinese government has fully realized that to enable the consumers, food industry and other stakeholders to learn about the current situation of food safety and participate in food safety control activities is an efficient way of strengthening national food safety control system and improving the confidence of consumers to food safety. Based on this understanding, the Chinese government has adopted various measures and ways to promote the participation of all stakeholders, especially the consumers. However, we are also aware of the challenges we are facing and the problems we have. The participation of Chinese consumers in food safety control is still relatively not adequate, especially consumers in the rural areas. Most of the food industries in China are small and middle size business; there is a need to explore better ways to communicate with those small and middle size food industries. China is a big and diversified country, with significant differences in economic development, education levels, culture background and dietary habits among different regions. There is a need to find more efficient ways in participation and risk communication. We sincerely hope to learn experience from other countries in the participation of consumers, industries and other stakeholders in food safety control and risk management.