

codex alimentarius commission



FOOD AND AGRICULTURE
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**REPORT OF THE FAO/WHO REGIONAL CONFERENCE ON FOOD SAFETY
FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC**

SEREMBAN, MALAYSIA, 24-27 MAY 2004

(Submission from FAO/WHO)



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Report of the FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for Asia and the Pacific

Seremban, Malaysia, 24-27 May 2004

Introduction

1. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) jointly convened the FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for Asia and the Pacific (the Conference) in an effort to facilitate discussion on practical actions and recommendations to promote food safety in the countries of the Asian and Pacific region. The Conference was held in Seremban, State of Negri Sembilan, Malaysia from 24 to 27 May 2004 at the kind invitation of the Government of Malaysia. The Conference was attended by high-ranking policy officers and technical experts from 36 Asia and Pacific member countries and territories of FAO and WHO. It was also attended by ten international organizations as observers. A list of all participants is included in Annex 1.
2. This Conference is part of a series of global and regional meetings that FAO and WHO are convening to meet the needs of member countries for policy guidance and capacity building in food safety. This series began with the “*First FAO/WHO Global Forum of Food Safety Regulators*” in Morocco from 28 to 30 January 2002, followed by a “*Pan-European Conference on Food Safety and Quality*” in Hungary from 25 to 28 February 2002. The Conference was convened in light of the recommendations and feedback from these two events, direction from FAO/WHO governing bodies, and the request of the delegates at the 13th Session of the Codex Coordinating Committee for Asia, Kuala Lumpur, from 17 to 20 September 2002.
3. Further aims of the Conference were to 1) Identify opportunities for regional cooperation related to agriculture, agribusiness, post-harvest production, food processing, food trade, public health, and consumer protection; 2) Provide a platform for broad co-operation and mutual understanding; 3) Promote increased exchange of information at all levels to improve transparency and capacity building and to more effectively communicate with consumers, producers, and industries to improve food safety.
4. The reports of the two preparatory meetings are available as Annex 2*. The Provisional Agenda for the Conference is found in Annex 3.

Agenda Item 1. Opening Ceremony

5. The opening ceremony began with a statement from Dr Abd. Rahim bin Hj Mohamad, Director of the Food Quality Control Division, Malaysia on behalf of Dato’ Dr Shafie Ooyub, the Deputy Director-General of Health (Public Health), Malaysia in which he reminded the participants of the importance of food safety for the countries of the region. The speaker also emphasised that all participants at the Conference are working towards the same objective, regardless of their differences in approaches to improving food safety, and that all participants are allies in the struggle against food hazards. The speaker stressed that safe food does not necessarily mean risk-free food. He also expressed the desire that this Conference will provide the impetus for further collaborative efforts in the area of food safety, especially in building alliances for capacity building and scientific co-operation. The text of his speech is appended as Annex 4.

* Annexes 2 to 9 not included in this report.

6. In his opening remarks on behalf of FAO, Mr Hartwig de Haen, Assistant Director-General, Economic and Social Department, informed the Conference of the series of regional and global meetings that FAO and WHO are jointly organizing to provide fora for food safety officials to share information on national experiences in regulating and promoting food safety. He highlighted the importance of food safety for all people, in the interest of both public health and economic efficiency and competitiveness. He recalled the challenges for the countries of the region to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their food control systems and the specific conditions of the region in relation to rapid urbanization, food trade opportunities and growing intensification of livestock production, which increase the potential of food safety risks. Mr de Haen further informed the Conference of various actions taken by FAO, in partnership with WHO and other organizations, to assist member countries in their efforts to improve food safety and quality and reiterated his Organization's readiness to further expand its capacity building programme to assist the countries of the region in this field, if funds become available. The text of his speech is appended in Annex 5.

7. The WHO Representative for Malaysia, Singapore, and Brunei, Dr Han Tieru, welcomed the participants on behalf of his Organization. In his presentation, the speaker reminded the Conference of the growing food safety concern in the world and of the burden food borne disease has on the world population. In the Asia and Pacific region, WHO's latest estimates show that every year, more than 700 000 people die from cases of food- or waterborne diarrhoea. He stressed that in the past, many problems have stemmed from our inability to ensure that all partners and government authorities involved in food safety work together. He expressed the hope that the present FAO/WHO collaboration in the joint convening of this Conference would inspire multi-disciplinary collaboration at the national level between agriculture, health and other sectors. The text of his address is appended as Annex 6.

8. The Conference was officially opened by the Honourable Datuk Dr Abdul Latiff Ahmad, Deputy Minister of Health, Malaysia, who thanked FAO and WHO for providing Malaysia with the honour of hosting this Conference. The speaker highlighted the changes that have taken place in the food production, trading, and consumption patterns in the countries of the Asia and Pacific region, and which continue to increase the challenges to food safety systems. The speaker emphasized that although great progress has been made in improving food safety, all stakeholders can and must do more to adapt food safety systems to respond to and prevent food borne illnesses. The speaker noted with pleasure the selected theme for the Conference, "Practical Actions to Promote Food Safety", which emphasizes the action-oriented focus of the Conference. The text of his speech is appended as Annex 7.

Agenda Item 2. Designation of Conference Chairs and Rapporteur

9. The Conference designated Dato' Dr Shafie Ooyub of Malaysia as Conference Chairperson, Mr Zhang Yan Qiu of China and Dr Dennis Bittisnich of Australia as vice-chairpersons and Dr S.R. Gupta of India as Conference rapporteur. The Conference expressed their appreciation to these members for their agreement to serve in these roles.

Agenda Item 3. Adoption of the Agenda

10. The Conference adopted the proposed agenda and agreed to the timetable as presented by the secretariat.

Agenda Item 4. Keynote Addresses

11. Dr Supachai Kunaratanapruk of Thailand presented the first keynote address, citing examples of the importance of improving food safety to foster health and economic development in the region and practical actions which can be implemented to do so. The speaker emphasized the need for regional collaboration and sharing of resources available within the countries of the region. He urged countries to increase harmonization of their food safety systems and standards, and to develop an "inter-country alert system" in addition to national surveillance systems. He emphasized the importance of adapting modern technology to suit local production systems, especially in developing countries. This applies to Good Agricultural Practices and the farm-to-fork approach. He further emphasized the importance of consumer education and awareness raising related to food safety. The text of his speech is available as Annex 8.

12. Mr Neil McLeod of New Zealand presented the second keynote address, presenting examples of practical actions implemented in his country to improve food safety, and the necessity of instilling trust and confidence in the safety of food, both for exports from their country and for the health of local consumers. The speaker described the vision of the New Zealand Food Safety Authority and its risk-based approach to food safety management, which includes regulatory control of accredited verifiers who audit the food production, processing and retail/ export industries. His presentation is appended as Annex 9.

Agenda Item 5. Food Safety Legislation - Science and Risk-based Approaches to Harmonization

13. Dr Dennis Bittisnich, of Australia, presented the contents of the first discussion paper on science and risk-based approaches to effective food safety legislation. The paper addressed the numerous benefits, as well as the difficulties in implementing a risk analysis framework for food safety legislation. The presenter briefly discussed the three components of risk analysis and the impact of each on the development and implementation of effective food safety legislation. Whole-chain approaches to food safety legislation and the importance of performance-based, pro-active legislation were also presented. The importance of regional and international strategies for harmonization and alignment of food safety legislations was also presented.

14. The Conference welcomed the document, thanked Australia for preparing the paper, and highlighted that the enforcement of food safety legislation throughout the food supply chain is essential for an effective food control system that supports public health and safe food trade.

15. The Conference stressed the importance of utilizing the guidance documents on food safety legislation developed by FAO and WHO and that these agencies, in coordination with other relevant agencies, should continue to lead coordinated and integrated capacity building efforts in this area.

16. The Conference suggested that when developing food safety legislation, countries should not only give due consideration to their national needs, but should also take into account their obligations in respect to World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements. In developing and reviewing food safety regulatory measures, governments should consider a “farm to table” and preventative approach to food safety management and incorporate performance- based food safety standards. Risk- based food safety control systems should be considered and priority should be given to high- risk food.

Agenda Item 6. The Application of Risk Analysis in Food Control - Challenges and Benefits

17. Ms Melanie Fisher of Australia presented a paper on the application of risk analysis in food control and explained the structure of the food regulatory system in Australia. The importance and role of each of the three components of food safety risk analysis were highlighted. The presenter discussed the challenges of risk analysis, including the availability of data and required skills at both the national and international levels, and the benefits of risk analysis, including better use of resources and a better informed community. Four specific case studies were presented dealing with the following topics: chloropropanols, nitrofurans, *Listeria spp.*, and a new approach to capacity building in the region involving a training programme developed by Food Standards Australia New Zealand (FSANZ).

18. The Conference thanked Australia for preparing the paper and agreed on the importance of a comprehensive risk analysis framework to improve food safety.

19. The Conference expressed appreciation for the current training initiatives in food safety risk analysis, including the forthcoming FAO/WHO didactical manual and training pack on the subject.

20. The Conference noted the approach to treat issues of scientific uncertainty on a case-by-case basis, rather than using a generic approach to dealing with this uncertainty. The Conference noted that FAO/WHO provide guidance on the use of existing tools to assist in dealing with uncertainty. Countries must decide how to handle scientific uncertainty according to their national situations, taking into consideration their obligations under international agreements.

21. The Conference was informed of the upcoming FAO/WHO Technical Workshop on Substances without an Established Acceptable Daily Intake (ADI)/ Maximum Residue Limit (MRL) to be convened in Thailand from 24 to 26 August 2004.

22. The Conference emphasized the need for countries to strengthen means of generating and collecting reliable data relevant to food safety risk assessments.

Agenda Item 7. Prioritization and Coordination of Capacity Building Activities

23. Dr S.R. Gupta of India presented the paper on the Prioritization and Coordination of Capacity Building Activities. The presenter highlighted the necessity of evaluating the capacity building needs related to each of the components of the food control system. The presenter emphasized that countries need to identify and prioritize their specific, urgent, and important capacity building needs in the area of food safety so that an effective capacity building programme can be implemented accordingly.

24. The Conference welcomed the paper from India and agreed that capacity building activities are essential for developing countries' efforts to establish and operate effective national food safety control systems.

25. The Conference noted the diversity in food safety situations and capacity building needs among the countries of the region. It recognized, however, that there are several common deficiencies requiring urgent attention and which could be addressed regionally. It emphasized the importance of political will and commitment as a prerequisite to any capacity building effort.

26. The Conference underlined the importance of basing capacity building on a careful analysis and prioritization of actual needs and linking them to available resources and noted that FAO/WHO are developing a set of guidelines to assist in this needs assessment. The Conference considered the implementation of a risk-based approach to capacity building activities where the most resources are assigned to the areas at greatest risk.

27. The Conference noted the on-going initiatives such as the Association of South-east Asian Nations (ASEAN) Expert Group on Food Safety and their ASEAN Food Safety Improvement Plan and ASEAN Task Force on Codex. The Conference considered that these sub-regional efforts could be extended to include all the countries of the Asian and Pacific region.

28. The Conference considered the importance of regional or sub-regional sharing of resources such as equipment and facilities, laboratory referral testing systems and for regional Centres of Excellence to be established in various areas of food safety. The possibility of establishing a regional training institute for food safety was also discussed. The Conference considered the usefulness of establishing a regional committee on food safety and the frequency of its meetings.

29. The Conference considered the need for building capacity to meet independent standards from an outside organization such as International Standards Organization (ISO) and for the need for those standards to be incorporated into the national and international food safety framework. The Conference also considered the need to discuss food safety capacity building in the context of the WTO.

30. The Conference was informed of the work of the Standards and Trade Development Facility (secretariat housed by the WTO) to provide a mechanism for the coordination of the Sanitary and Phytosanitary Agreement (SPS)- related capacity building activities around the world through an internet-based database of capacity building activities implemented by the relevant donor agencies. It encouraged countries and organizations to contribute to this database.

Agenda Item 8. Communication, Information Exchange and Education Related to Food Safety

31. Mr Makoto Hirose of Japan presented a paper on Communication, Information Exchange, and Education Related to Food Safety based on the experiences of Japan. The recent food safety and food

safety-related incidents in Japan were highlighted. The presenter discussed the changes in the structure of the food safety administration of Japan, which were caused by these food safety incidents. Deficiencies were evidenced in the described cases in each of the following areas: information exchange, communication, consumer understanding, of a crisis management system, a lack of a sense of crisis, and insufficient co-operation between agencies. The presenter also noted that even though data demonstrated that highly pathogenic Avian Influenza could not infect humans through chicken and eggs, people still reduced their purchases of these commodities. He noted that Japan has improved its information collection and exchange activities with other countries and within Japan due to these incidents.

32. The Conference expressed its appreciation to Japan for preparing the paper and their honesty and transparency in describing these food safety incidents which occurred in Japan. The Conference noted the importance of communication, information exchange, and education in ensuring consumer health and protection and improving trade.

33. The Conference welcomed the proposed establishment of the International Food Safety Authorities Network and encouraged its development. The Conference noted that this network could allow for rapid exchange of information, including emergency information, between countries and across the food chain.

34. The Conference noted the initiatives in food safety education, communication, and information exchange implemented by various countries of the region. Important components of these campaigns include the collaboration of the various government ministries involved in food safety, academia, consumers, non-governmental organizations and industry, the involvement of mass media, establishment of sub-regional training programmes and education on food safety in elementary schools.

35. The Conference noted that many consumers erroneously think that highly pathogenic Avian Influenza is a food safety risk and that food safety officials must be careful not to use animal health issues in an attempt to increase the profile of food safety concerns, as this is mis-leading to the public and can create unnecessary fears. Countries must emphasize that measures are taken for animal health reasons, rather than food safety reasons. The Conference noted the increased difficulty for transparency in sharing the disease status of a food exporting country due to the economic implications.

36. The Conference also emphasized the importance of using international standards and related texts for food safety and urged FAO, WHO, Codex, and the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) to work together to provide a uniform source of information.

37. The Conference emphasized the importance of honesty, trustworthiness, accuracy, timeliness, transparency, scientifically-based information and cooperation with all competent authorities in developing media campaigns to communicate complex food safety issues and avoid mis-information.

Agenda Item 9. Food Borne Disease Monitoring and Surveillance Systems

38. Dr Hasan Abd. Rahman of Malaysia presented the paper on food borne disease (fbd) monitoring and surveillance systems. The speaker highlighted that better understanding of the occurrence of food borne diseases should enable the countries of the region to lower the risk of food borne diseases to the population and that integrated food chain disease surveillance will be effective in detection and control of food borne pathogens. He emphasized that leadership, political commitment, interdisciplinary collaboration, and coordinated activities at multiple levels with involvement from various agencies are the pre-requisites for strengthening the existing fbd surveillance systems.

39. The Conference recognized the need to identify risks and establish priorities for fbd surveillance based on the actual problems faced by each country.

40. The Conference considered that the availability of data to establish the burden of food borne disease should help to influence decision makers in securing appropriate allocation of funds to improve food safety.

Proceedings of the Working Groups

41. The Conference agreed to discuss the following items in two concurrent working groups: Working Group 1) Food borne disease monitoring and surveillance systems and Working Group 2) Capacity building: use of expertise and resources in the region to enhance food safety. The two working groups were requested to discuss their respective themes and to propose concrete recommendations and practical actions to improve food safety in the region in these specific areas. The Conference designated Dr. Dedi Fardiaz of Indonesia and Dr. DongHa Lee of the Republic of Korea as co-chairpersons of the first working group and Dr. Gilberto Layese of the Philippines and Dr. Nu'u'alofo Potoi of Samoa as co-chairpersons of the second working group. The Conference expressed their appreciation to these delegates for their agreement to serve in these roles.

42. The outcome of the two working groups have been incorporated in the Conference conclusions and recommendations as indicated below.

Launching of the International Portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health

43. The Conference witnessed the official launching of the International Portal on Food Safety, Animal and Plant Health through a live presentation by the FAO Secretariat and demonstration of its use and benefits for Member countries and stakeholders involved in international food and agricultural trade. The Conference expressed appreciation to FAO and partner agencies for the establishment of the Portal. An informational paper on the portal is available as Conference Room Document (CRD) 4.

Conference Side Events

44. Three side events to the Conference on issues of interest to the region were held on Wednesday, 26 May, the report writing day of the Conference. The International Tropical Fruit Network gave a presentation on the activities of this initiative. An informational document on this network is available as CRD 21. The International Life Sciences Institute (ILSI) South- East Asia organized a seminar on *Enterobacter sakazakii* in Infant Foods: Importance and Relevance to the Asia and Pacific Region. The agenda of this seminar and a background document are available as CRD 3 and 14, respectively and the executive summary of the seminar is appended as Annex 10. Consumers International organized a seminar on Food Safety in Street Vended Foods, the agenda of which is available as CRD 2. The summary of this event is appended as Annex 11.

Recommendations of the Conference

Food legislation and enforcement

45. The Conference recommended that, in order to successfully develop and enforce food safety legislation, member countries should:

- a) ensure the availability of technical, financial, and adequately trained human resources;
- b) establish national inter-agency committees to regularly review, update or revise legislation;
- c) conduct surveys and research in partnership with relevant national research institutions to ensure the availability of scientific data when establishing appropriate standards;
- d) continue to move towards the development of horizontal food standards, rather than product specific standards;
- e) take advantage of risk analysis and regulatory models developed by international agencies, in particular the Codex Alimentarius Commission, and establish mechanisms for sharing such information.

46. The Conference recommended that Member countries of the region should:

In the field of food safety policy

- a) work along with FAO and WHO to develop improved food safety administrations, policies and national plans of action;
- b) work along with FAO and WHO to strengthen the organization of food control administrations and activities at national level, including the review, drafting, and harmonization of food safety legislation and standards (regionally and with Codex);
- c) along with FAO, WHO and OIE, develop a means for encouraging transparency in sharing the

disease status of a food exporting country;

In the field of risk assessment

- d) share risk assessment data, especially among those with similar food consumption and preparation patterns, to avoid duplication of work and also take advantage of risk assessments available internationally;
- e) consider the cost and testing capabilities requirements when adopting Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs) established by international organizations or other parties. Such MRLs should be based on sound scientific evidence.

In the field of information exchange and communication

- f) utilize national websites as a means of providing relevant food safety related information, e.g. crises management, alerts, listing of exporters, directory of experts in food safety, research data, training programs and courses;
- g) collect and verify the food safety- related information presented by the media and explore ways and means of making the media a partner in food safety education and awareness raising;

In the field of stakeholder involvement

- h) ensure collaboration, cooperation, and coordination of activities among all stakeholders involved in food safety; including government, industry, academia and consumers, at the national, sub-regional, regional and international levels;
- i) develop and implement, in collaboration with the industry and other stakeholders, appropriate educational and awareness- raising programmes on food safety addressed to consumers and the public in general;

In the field of food testing

- j) further develop their capabilities in food testing through the acquisition of chemicals and modern laboratory equipment, the training of laboratory personnel and the seeking of international accreditation for their official testing laboratories;

In the field of capacity building

- k) prioritize their food safety capacity building needs and develop capacity building programmes to meet these needs, using tools such as the soon-to-be-released FAO/WHO Guidelines for Assessing Food Safety Capacity Building Needs;

In the field of training of food producers and handlers

- l) make a special effort to promote the application of Good Agricultural Practices, Good Manufacturing Practices and HACCP throughout the food chain through provisions of proper infrastructure and training of food producers and handlers;

In the field of food borne disease surveillance

- m) strengthen national fbd surveillance programmes and food contaminant data collection in order to provide more accurate information on their national food safety situation.

47. The Conference urged that all relevant stakeholders:

- a) Submit relevant data on chemical contaminants and/or residues to the relevant FAO/ WHO Expert bodies so that sound scientific advice can be provided to Codex and FAO/WHO member countries.

48. The Conference recommended that FAO and WHO:

In the field of policy advice

- a) support the countries of the region in the development of food safety policies, administrations and national plans of action;
- b) provide advice to member countries in strengthening the organization of food control activities at national level, including the review, drafting, and harmonization of food safety legislation and standards (regionally and with Codex);
- c) along with OIE, develop a means for encouraging transparency in sharing the disease status of a food exporting country;

In the field of capacity building

- d) in collaboration with providers and donor agencies, continue to assist countries of the region in training of technical staff involved in various food safety- related activities, including in the application of risk analysis, food contaminant analysis, analytical quality assurance systems and accreditation, food inspection, and HACCP;
- e) in collaboration with providers and donor agencies, assist countries in prioritizing their food safety capacity building needs and develop capacity building programmes to meet these needs, using tools such as the soon-to-be-released FAO/WHO Guidelines for Assessing Food Safety Capacity Building Needs;
- f) assist countries of the region, through the Codex Trust Fund and relevant capacity building activities, to better understand Codex work and procedures so as to enhance the quality and effectiveness of their participation;

In the field of information exchange and regional cooperation

- g) work, in collaboration with related regional bodies, such as the ASEAN Expert Group on Food Safety and the Pacific Public Health Surveillance Network (PPHSN), and the Standard and Trade Development Facility (STDF) Secretariat to develop a database of food safety experts, technical organizations/agencies and donors to better coordinate food safety capacity building activities to avoid duplication and ensure synergy;
- h) assist in the identification of those laboratories within the region that can play a role as regional reference laboratories and training centres in their respective fields of expertise;
- i) provide relevant, scientifically- sound food safety educational materials to national governments so that they can disseminate them to large national audiences;

In the field of food borne disease surveillance

- j) organize seminars/training sessions on the importance of fbd surveillance, involving all relevant stakeholders from all sectors;
- k) coordinate a working group to further discuss the details and logistics of a regional food borne disease surveillance network in Asia and the Pacific;
- l) invite member countries of the Asia and Pacific region to designate their representatives in the initial electronic working group on fbd surveillance;
- m) provide continued capacity building assistance to member countries in all aspects of fbd surveillance to ensure the timeliness, accuracy, and relevance of the data that is collected.

49. The Conference recommended that the Working Group on fbd surveillance should:

- a) clearly define the objectives of the fbd surveillance network;
- b) develop a survey to be completed by the member countries of the region which identifies the existing fbd surveillance data in the region and the capacity of each country to conduct fbd surveillance;
- c) evaluate the fbd surveillance systems and information currently available within and outside the region and take into account their strengths and weaknesses in designing the regional fbd surveillance network;
- d) determine the priority food borne diseases in the region and the format and type of data which should be collected regionally.

50. The Conference recommended that the fbd surveillance network should:

- a) recognise the importance of linking fbd surveillance data with food contaminants data in order to effectively reduce the burden of food borne diseases;
- b) prioritize fbd surveillance initially, with inclusion of contaminant monitoring data and its linkages to disease once the fbd surveillance network is functioning adequately.

Adoption of the Final Report

51. The Conference discussed and adopted the final Report, agreed that it would be a public document and requested the Secretariat to publish it through the usual channels.

52. The Conference agreed to forward the report as an informational document to the 27th Codex Alimentarius Commission (Geneva, 28 June- 3 July 2004) and to the Second FAO/WHO Global Forum of Food Safety Regulators to be held in Bangkok 12-14 October 2004.

Closing of the Conference

53. The Conference expressed its warm thanks to the Malaysian Government for the efficient organization of the Conference and for its generous hospitality. The Conference also expressed its appreciation to FAO and WHO for organizing the Conference. The Chairperson then closed the Conference.

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