

**De:** WHO/FAO

**Press Release 01/43 Joint WHO/FAO**

**CODEX ALIMENTARIUS COMMISSION (2-7 JULY)**

**FAO/WHO CALL FOR MORE INTERNATIONAL  
COLLABORATION TO SOLVE FOOD SAFETY AND QUALITY  
PROBLEMS**

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Geneva, 2 July - The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO) have called upon countries to apply international food safety and quality standards to protect health and trade in food. Clear, science-based and universally known standards will also assist in restoring consumer confidence.

"As the movement of people, trade of foods - including ingredients and food animal feeding stuffs - becomes more and more global, it turns out to be more and more difficult to solve food safety problems by one country without international collaboration and a consolidated strategy to combat problems," said WHO Director-General Dr Gro Harlem Brundtland in her opening speech at the Codex Alimentarius Commission meeting in Geneva (2-7 July). "In a globalized world, we all swim in a single microbial sea."

FAO Assistant Director-General Hartwig de Haen said in his statement that public awareness of food safety issues has increased dramatically, especially in developed countries. "Concern over BSE disease, the dioxin crisis in 1999, numerous outbreaks of food-borne illnesses due to microbiological contamination of foods, and the appearance in human food of a genetically modified maize approved only for animal feeding has strongly influenced public opinion," Mr de Haen said. "FAO urges governments to take consumer concerns seriously and not to play them down and they should apply and enforce Codex standards more rapidly and effectively."

The Codex Alimentarius Commission is the highest international body on food quality and safety standards. The Commission is a subsidiary body of FAO and WHO. It has currently 165 member countries.

Governments across the globe urgently need to upgrade their domestic food safety systems, WHO and FAO said. In many developing countries, there is often no comprehensive food safety system in place at all.

These countries have an opportunity to "leap-forward" up to current food-safety systems, skipping over all the decades of gradual progress and hard-earned experiences of industrialized countries and adapt modern food safety systems that work well.

The "leap-forward" approach will promote the efficient and effective development of food safety systems, incorporating preventive, risk-based approaches, comprising surveillance, risk assessment and implementation of risk management strategies.

This is a win-win situation. Industrial countries will get better reassurances that food imports are safe, while developing countries will improve both domestic food production standards and be able to expand their export markets.

Dr Brundtland asked the Codex Alimentarius Commission to "improve the systems we use to ensure food safety and re-establish consumer confidence. We must reassess them all the way from the farm to the table." According to Dr Brundtland, the Codex Commission needs to "ensure that there are clear and useful international guidelines for genetically modified food."

Dr Brundtland called for a fast and science-based process that encourages input from both developing countries and consumers. According to Dr Brundtland, the WHO is analyzing the possibility of establishing a trust fund to support improved participation of all developing countries.

"We also need to inform the public about the work of the Commission better than we currently do," she added. Dr Brundtland noted that despite the stories that circulate in the mass media, the majority of food safety problems do not even make it into reporting systems.

"People have a right to food which is nutritious and safe," Hartwig de Haen said. "Consumers have repeatedly expressed that for them factors most important to their choice of food are nutritional value, safety, and quality such as freshness and taste. FAO gives equal importance to all of these factors. Agricultural producers and food processors share the responsibility to ensure that these choices are guaranteed throughout the food chain. To meet this objective, FAO has increased its support to member countries."

Mr de Haen also appealed to scientists world-wide to increase research on not sufficiently understood food safety issues such as microbiological food contamination, BSE and genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

FAO is setting up an Internet-based information system on food safety, plant and animal health with other UN agencies and partners. This will include a rapid alert system on food safety issues. "There is a need for governments and the public to have quick access to the Codex Alimentarius standards and to information on new hazards caused by plant pests and animal diseases as well as food-borne diseases affecting humans," Mr de Haen said.

Mr de Haen emphasized that all countries should actively participate in Codex Alimentarius. To be prepared for this, countries need efficient and functioning food control systems, he said. "It is important to avoid that ill-informed countries become subject to pressure from interest groups."

Developing countries are particularly in need of capacity building. FAO is currently initiating a Global Facility on Food Safety and Quality for Least Developed Countries. The facility aims at strengthening developing countries' own food regulatory systems, their competitiveness in international food trade and their preparedness for the participation in Codex.

WHO is fully committed to promoting health and equity through increasing the safety of food. The emphasis is on actions that reflect people's health priorities in resource-limited settings. Sufficient and safe food is a prerequisite for health. The Organization's focus is on actions that reflect people's health priorities in resource-limited settings. Therefore, WHO is building its contributions to food safety with particular emphasis on risk assessment. It will continue to support health action within Codex in ways that best serve Member States and their people, particularly in developing countries.

According to WHO, an estimated 2 million children die every year from diarrhoeal diseases caused by food and water. In addition, it is estimated that thousands of millions of cases of food-borne disease occur every year. Even in industrialized countries, it is estimated that one third of the population has a food-borne disease event every year, and up to 20 people per million die from such diseases. These estimates relate primarily to microbiological problems. If diseases stemming from chemical hazards in food are included, the total disease burden is even higher.