



**REGIONAL COMMITTEE FOR THE
EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN**

October 2015

**Sixty-second Session
Kuwait, Kuwait City, 5-8 October 2015**

TECHNICAL MEETING

FOOD SAFETY PERSPECTIVES IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

Objectives of the event

The objective of the event is to highlight the role of the health sector in leading and engaging in multisectoral initiatives to improve food safety in the Region.

Background

Food safety is one of the most critical issues for public health and ensuring food safety along the entire food production and consumption chain is crucial. Unsafe food is known to be involved in more than 200 different diseases, from communicable diseases, such as cholera and other diarrhoeal diseases, to noncommunicable diseases, including various forms of cancer. Food safety goes beyond protecting people's health as foodborne diseases can have a significant economic impact on individuals, communities, businesses and countries. Ensuring food safety is therefore a shared responsibility of government ministries, organizations, industries, trades and the consumer.

In 2010, the World Health Assembly highlighted the importance of food safety with resolution WHA63.3 on advancing food safety initiatives. To build on this resolution and to provide a framework for action on the priority issues of food safety, WHO published *Advancing food safety initiatives: strategic plan for food safety including foodborne zoonoses 2013–2022*. The plan covers all aspects of food safety across the entire food chain, including foodborne diseases of zoonotic origin. It aims to lower the burden of foodborne disease, thereby strengthening health security and ensuring sustainable development of Member States.

While progress on food safety has been made in some countries in the Region, many continue to face challenges in responding to existing and emerging food safety problems. Some countries lack adequate regulatory structures, robust surveillance systems for foodborne diseases and capacity for disease risk assessments and communication, and need to strengthen mechanisms for intersectoral collaboration. Implementation of core capacities under the International Health Regulations in the area of food safety is still incomplete and only five Member States of the Region report 100% implementation, with the regional average at 75%.

A range of measures is needed to improve national food safety systems, including a review and update of food laws and regulations, where such needs are identified. A large proportion of the food legislation in the Region dates back 40 years or more, when many of the current concepts and approaches in food safety had not yet been developed.

Given the need for the active support of all those involved in the food production and consumption chain, the lack of a holistic multisectoral approach is one of the greatest current challenges to food safety in the Region. Multisectoral collaboration can be strengthened through application of the “One Health” approach, a collaborative effort by multiple disciplines working locally, nationally and globally to attain the optimal health of people, animals and plants.

Information-sharing between involved agencies needs to be strengthened, including laboratory-based surveillance data (animal and human), and a food monitoring data exchange should be established. It is important that minimum requirements concerning food handlers’ knowledge of food safety are determined and training programmes initiated, and that food safety authorities develop “a food safety culture” among food business owners and food handlers. Countries need to develop human resources in food control systems through systematic on-the-job training and by offering degree courses in food safety and related disciplines.

There has been a shift in global food safety thinking away from end-product testing towards greater emphasis on preventing food safety issues from developing in the first place. This shift in focus requires risk analysis, highlighting the need for risk assessment capacity to be developed in national food safety systems.

The WHO regional Centre for Environmental Health Action (CEHA) conducted food safety assessment and profiling missions in 15 countries of the Region in July-September 2015. The aim was to assess strengths and weaknesses in the national food safety systems and to delineate priority development actions required to address identified gaps. Special focus was placed on the public health aspects of national food safety systems, in line with the mandate of WHO of building institutional capacities to prevent, detect and manage foodborne health risks and outbreaks. The following components of the food safety system were addressed in the assessment:

- laws, regulations and implementation of food safety policy;
- intersectoral coordination;
- food safety monitoring and inspection;
- disease surveillance and outbreak response;
- emergency preparedness and response;
- human and financial resources; and
- information and risk communications.

It is envisaged that the findings of the assessments will: facilitate development of a regional framework to implement the global strategic plan on food safety; lead to establishment of a regional database on food safety in the Region; and strengthen WHO’s support to Member States according to identified priorities.

Expected outcomes

Heightened awareness among Member States of the need and means to strengthen national capacity and preparedness in the area of food safety under the leadership of the Ministry of Health through the One Health approach across the food chain, through development of integrated surveillance, improved laboratory capacity, application of risk-analysis principles, risk-based food control planning and updating of food laws where required.