



In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful

Message from

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to the

REGIONAL MEETING ON FOOD SAFETY

IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN REGION

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Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

On behalf of the World Health Organization, I have the pleasure of welcoming you to this important meeting on food safety in Cairo, Egypt. I am very pleased to see the strong mutual cooperation and collaboration between WHO and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations in the field of food safety at the regional level.

Following the occurrence of a number of extremely serious large-scale food emergencies in the recent past, policy-makers and consumers in a large number of countries are re-evaluating the existing national food safety strategies. Many of these food emergencies have involved more than one country, such as the bovine spongiform encephalopathy crisis, the dioxin contamination, the recent foot and mouth disease epidemic, melamine milk contamination and the *E.coli* 0104 outbreak in Europe linked to fenugreek seeds earlier this year.

Issues such as the increasing application of biotechnology in food production and the new climate in world trade, and the challenges these imply, necessitate comprehensive review and overhaul of current national food control systems. A future

goal in food safety should be to develop sustainable, integrated food safety systems to reduce health risks along the entire food chain, from the primary producer to the consumer.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

In 1999, the WHO Regional Committee for the Eastern Mediterranean adopted the regional plan of action for food safety in the 21st century. In this plan, countries of the Region agreed to assess their current food safety infrastructure and problems at national level and to carry out a country diagnosis in order to prepare a country profile. They also agreed to develop, strengthen and implement effectively their national food safety programmes; to continue to monitor and evaluate their food safety activities; and finally to initiate a coordinated effort to improve food control systems. Emphasis was placed on the inclusion of all relevant partners in food safety programme activities, such as government departments in food safety, food control and public health, as well as industry, trade organizations, research industries and academic bodies, and last but certainly not least consumer organizations. Following the adoption of the plan, a number of new initiatives have been taken at national and regional level.

On a global level, food safety is an increasingly important public health issue, with growing focus on the inclusion of consumers and consumer associations in decision-making processes. In 2000, the Fifty-third World Health Assembly passed resolution WHA53.15 on food safety, which recognized, among other things, that foodborne diseases significantly affect peoples' health and well-being and have economic consequences, not only for individuals but for communities and countries as well.

In the resolution, the Health Assembly recognized the work of Codex Alimentarius Commission as being important for protection of the health of consumers and at the same time, ensure fair practices in international trade. For future action, Member States were urged to integrate food safety matters into information programmes for consumers, particularly in school curricula, and to initiate culture-specific health and nutrition education programmes for food handlers, producers and consumers. They were also urged to develop outreach programmes for the private sector in order to improve food safety at the consumer level, along with collaboration with consumer associations

and the food industry in order to raise awareness regarding the use of good and ecologically safe farming and good hygiene and manufacturing practices.

Most if not all countries in the world are involved in international trade in food. Indeed, this international trade in food plays an important role in providing safe and nutritious diets for the world's population. Traditionally, international trade was subject to certain tariff and non-tariff barriers at national borders, some of which were required to protect the health of the consumers and some of which were established to protect domestic economics.

In our region, several regional trade agreements were reached such as Arab Free Trade area in 1996, Arab Maghreb Union in 1989 and Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981. All of these trade agreements were to facilitate regional integration and intra-regional agricultural trade. These agreements stimulated countries to improve their food safety and international trade requirements.

The adoption of Codex standards as scientifically justified norms for the purpose of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) is of immense significance. It is noteworthy that SPS and TBT both acknowledge the importance of harmonizing standards internationally so as to minimize or eliminate risk of sanitary, phytosanitary and other technical standards becoming barriers to trade.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear Colleagues,

Today countries of the Region are maintaining measures to ensure overall food quality, safety and consumer protection through foodborne disease surveillance, promotion of public awareness of emerging food safety concerns, such as biotechnology, and fostering the participation of consumers in risk communication and decision-making processes concerning food safety. However, many countries need stronger capacity in managing national food safety through intersectoral and intrasectoral coordination. Although good manufacturing practices and quality assurance systems have been introduced throughout the Region, we are nevertheless receiving alerts of several large outbreaks of *Salmonella* infection caused by sesame-based foods, such as halwa and tahini, manufactured in the Region. The last alert was in mid June 2011 for fenugreek.

Dear Colleagues,

The objectives of this of this meeting are to exchange experience and information on food safety; identify practical actions to strengthen national food control systems; promote the establishment of regional and subregional networks; identify opportunities for improving cooperation in promoting food safety; introduce risk assessment, management and communication skills and techniques in food safety; and develop country plans for the coming 5 years.

I expect that your deliberations during the working sessions in this meeting will indeed lead to concrete plans of action to promote food safety in your countries in order to achieve the goal of safe food for all.

I would like to thank our colleagues from FAO and from WHO headquarters for their collaboration. Finally it only remains for me to wish you a successful meeting, and a pleasant stay in this beautiful city of Cairo.