

Summary report on the

**First INFOSAN regional meeting in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean and FAO Near East and North Africa regions: strengthening intraregional collaborative efforts for advanced preparedness and efficient management of food safety incidents**

Hybrid meeting  
11–12 November 2024



**World Health Organization**

Eastern Mediterranean Region



**Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations**

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## **1. Introduction**

Food safety incidents denote situations where there is a potential or confirmed health risk due to consuming contaminated food products and require investigation under the mandate of a competent authority. Food contamination may result from accidents, inadequate regulatory and control oversight, fraudulent practices, or natural occurrences. The implications of food contamination can manifest as a range of health issues, including diarrhoeal diseases, reproductive and developmental disorders, and certain forms of cancer.

The countries of the World Health Organization (WHO) Eastern Mediterranean Region and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) Near East and North Africa region face considerable challenges posed by foodborne diseases to public health and the economy, largely due to the high incidence of foodborne illnesses. This incidence is anticipated to rise due to climate change, political instability and conflict, lifestyle changes and socioeconomic conditions, underscoring the need for enhanced food safety measures and proactive strategies to mitigate these risks.

Robust national food control systems are needed to protect public health and advance sustainable economic development across the WHO Eastern Mediterranean and FAO Near East and North Africa regions. Ensuring this requires a collaborative endeavour involving governments, industries, local and international organizations, and consumers. Sustained collaboration facilitates accurate information exchange, empowering authorities to implement effective and timely preventive control measures. This, in turn, limits the distribution of contaminated food, prevents foodborne disease outbreaks and strengthens food safety systems to reduce the burden of foodborne diseases.

WHO and FAO established the [International Food Safety Authority Network \(INFOSAN\)](#) in 2004 in response to increased concerns among countries regarding health emergencies caused by natural, accidental, or intentional food contamination. Since then, INFOSAN has supported countries by facilitating and promoting the rapid exchange of information during food safety incidents in international food trade, and facilitating and guiding the implementation of risk management measures.

During 2023, INFOSAN facilitated communications with Eastern Mediterranean Region countries during 26 food safety incidents. The multi-country [outbreak of \*Salmonella\* Typhimurium](#) linked to chocolate products in Europe and the United States of America in 2022 demonstrated that having an efficient, robust and swift system for exchanging food safety information at every stage of the food chain is critical.

The growing importance of INFOSAN has been further underlined in several international fora. The [International Health Regulations \(IHR\) 2005](#) recognize INFOSAN as the primary tool for international communication during food safety emergencies. [INFOSAN and IHR collaborate](#) on food safety issues to ensure a prompt response to international health crises. INFOSAN also plays a crucial role in developing the country core capacities needed for food safety emergency preparedness and response, as mandated by the IHR 2005. Countries report annually on food safety indicators for multisectoral collaboration mechanisms for food safety events under the [State Party Self-Assessment Annual Reporting \(SPAR\) framework](#).

The WHO Eastern Mediterranean and FAO Near East and North Africa regions are striving to support countries to strengthen their national food control systems and achieve the global targets outlined in two key strategies, the [WHO Global Strategy for Food Safety 2022–2030](#) and [FAO Strategic Priorities for Food Safety within the FAO Strategic Framework](#)

2022–2031. They operate through the Regional Health Alliance, a United Nations regional collaborative platform that brings together 18 multilateral health, development and humanitarian agencies aiming to accelerate the progress on the health-related Sustainable Development Goals.

On 11–12 November 2024, the WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, the FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa and the INFOSAN Secretariat held the first regional INFOSAN meeting.

The hybrid format meeting gathered INFOSAN emergency contact points (ECPs) and focal points, International Health Regulation national focal points and Codex contact points from across the regions. The Codex Coordinating Committee for the Near East and the League of Arab States also attended as partners.

The objectives of the meeting were to:

- provide an update on the status of INFOSAN membership, notifications and follow-up activities in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region;
- strengthen INFOSAN’s networking, reporting and responsiveness on food safety and fraud incidents at both national and regional levels;
- identify key actions that need to be implemented in 2025/2026 to improve Member States IHR capacity in multisectoral collaboration on food safety and food fraud;
- promote collaboration and networking among INFOSAN members in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean and FAO Near East and North Africa regions and identify opportunities for joint activities and projects;
- showcase the critical role of INFOSAN in enhancing food safety at the national and regional levels and identify areas that can be improved;
- evaluate efforts in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean and the FAO Near East and North Africa regions for the necessary adaptation

measures and key priority actions that need to be implemented to tackle current food safety issues arising from climate change; and

- explore the adoption of intelligence tools based on artificial intelligence (AI) and the Internet of Things to support foresight and horizon scanning approaches and early warning systems for food safety and fraud incidents.

## **2. Summary of discussions**

### *Introduction*

Eng. Mazen Malkawi, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, inaugurated the meeting and reaffirmed the collective responsibility to ensure the safety and quality of food by working together for sufficient, safe, affordable and nutritious food for all.

Dr Ahmad Mukhtar, FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa, acknowledged the significance of the meeting in enhancing intra-regional collaboration to improve preparedness and the effective management of food safety incidents.

Dr Rachelle El Khoury, INFOSAN Secretariat at WHO, moderated the participant's introduction. Over 90 participants attended from Afghanistan, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Iran (the Islamic Republic of), Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, the occupied Palestinian territory, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Dr Eleonora Dupouy, INFOSAN Secretariat at FAO, introduced the participants to the objectives of the meeting.



*Food safety updates from the Eastern Mediterranean Region*

Dr Eva Inam Al Zein, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, and Dr Moustapha Mohamed, FAO Regional Office for the Near East and North Africa, provided updates on efforts in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean and FAO Near East and North Africa regions to advance food safety and preventing foodborne risks.

Mr Khalid Al Zhrani, Codex Coordinating Committee for the Near East (CCNE) presented the role of the CCNE in addressing the challenges posed by food safety emergencies. He highlighted the Codex Alimentarius principles and guidelines for the exchange of information in food safety emergency situations.

Eng. Mazen Malkawi, gave a presentation on climate change as a driver of emerging food safety risks. He urged more interdisciplinary research and concerted efforts among food scientists, public health officers, epidemiologists, veterinarians, meteorologists and statisticians to better understand and address the challenges of climate change and food safety.

Dr Lamiaa Abd Elwahed, League of Arab States, provided an overview of food safety within the Pan Arab Free Trade Area (PAFTA), including the Arab Task Force on Food Safety and its role in collaborating with leading international organizations responsible for food safety to enhance the food safety agenda across the Arab region.

*INFOSAN's achievements in 2024 and looking ahead*

Dr El Khoury provided an update on the key achievements made by the INFOSAN Secretariat at WHO in 2024 and the activities planned for 2025 and 2026. She described the indicators and targets for 2030 of the WHO Global Strategy for Food Safety 2022–2030 and IHR-SPAR tool.

*The IHR and foodborne diseases in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean and FAO Near East and North Africa regions*

The multisectoral collaboration mechanism for food safety events, which is tracked through the IHR-SPAR, has an indicator that measures the capacity of countries to detect, investigate and respond to food safety events. As specified in the WHO Global Strategy for Food Safety 2022–2030, there is a global target of 100% for all Member States by 2030, with a minimum requirement of 80% capacity.

In the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region, over 50% of the Member States that reported their SPAR in 2023 had food safety indicator scores below 80%, with 25% of Member States reporting food safety scores as low as 20%. INFOSAN Members States from Africa and the WHO Eastern Mediterranean Region had the lowest response rate to INFOSAN requests during food safety incidents, with at 32% and 40%, respectively, compared to a global average of 70%.

Participants reviewed the national capacity scores reported through the SPAR in 2023 and identified key areas for improvement. INFOSAN's recommendations to countries at different capacity levels are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. INFOSAN recommendations**

<b>Capacity score</b>	<b>Countries</b>	<b>Recommendations on reaching the next SPAR level</b>
1	Somalia, Sudan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Designate an INFOSAN focal point at the national competent authorities according to the structure and governance of the country. Replace inactive ECPs.</li> <li>- Establish and consolidate communication between ECPs and IHR national focal points.</li> </ul>
2	Djibouti, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Designate/replace focal points in all relevant national authorities.</li> </ul>
3	Libya, Syrian Arab Republic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Establish and consolidate communication at the national level between ECPs, national IHR focal points and the INFOSAN Secretariat.</li> </ul>
4	Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Islamic Republic of Iran, Kuwait, Oman, United Arab Emirates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Audit the food safety emergency response plan annually and adapt the plan accordingly.</li> </ul>
5	Bahrain, Qatar, Saudi Arabia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ensure that the capacity level is consistently maintained.</li> </ul>

Dr Amgad Elkhoully, WHO Regional Office for the Eastern Mediterranean, described IHR's purpose and scope and presented the regional average IHR food safety capacity scores compared to the global average 2019–2023.

Success stories on coordinating between the INFOSAN and IHR focal points were shared by Dr Abdelghni Azzi, INFOSAN ECP in Morocco.

Dr Rayyan Saqah, INFOSAN ECP in Saudi Arabia, provided a practical example of how a national plan can enhance preparedness, coordination and response during food safety incidents, noting the key steps, challenges and successes.

Dr Ayman Abdelkader, Abu Dhabi Agriculture and Food Safety Authority, provided a brief overview of the management system for food safety incidents in Abu Dhabi and the overall experience of the United Arab Emirates.

### *Simulation exercise*

A simulation exercise involving a foodborne illness outbreak linked to internationally distributed food products provided a practical example of a food safety event with international implications.

The exercise aimed to:

- improve understanding of the roles and responsibilities of relevant stakeholders connected through INFOSAN and other regional networks;
- apply principles of effective risk communication throughout the evolution of the incident; and
- demonstrate the flow of information during a food safety event with international stakeholders.

An interactive approach was utilized to collect participants' perspectives as they went through the exercise. Over 34 INFOSAN members provided inputs, while further insights were provided by other participants directly through the meeting chat.

### *Development of the Food Safety Emergency Response roadmap*

Dr Eleonora Dupouy focused on the development and implementation of the Food Safety Emergency Response (FSER) roadmap, offering participants insights into the [FAO/WHO Framework for developing national food safety emergency response plans](#) and country-specific practices that support effective food safety emergency management and informed about the FAO Strategic Priorities for Food Safety 2022–2031.

Following the FSER session, participants worked in breakout sessions with their national colleagues to develop a food safety emergency response roadmap. Key actions to enhance national food safety emergency response efforts within the context of the IHR were identified for 13 countries. In addition, participants highlighted some key recommendations for WHO, FAO and INFOSAN to support these efforts.

## **3. Recommendations**

### *To Member States*

1. Ensure that the INFOSAN ECPs and Focal Points are regularly updated to the INFOSAN Secretariat.
2. Establish robust structures and multisectoral coordination mechanisms between ECPs, Focal Points and IHR focal points at the national, intermediate and local levels.
3. Assess, test and regularly update national food safety emergency response plans.


4. Identify the main activities to be undertaken at the national level in 2025–2026 to improve multisectoral collaboration for food safety, a key element of IHR core capacities.
5. Ensure and facilitate the active participation of INFOSAN members in regional and global meetings and training sessions.

*To WHO and FAO*

6. Develop a regional FAO/WHO INFOSAN strategy that outlines regional-specific priority actions for 2025–2030 to achieve the global targets set in the WHO Global Strategy for Food Safety 2022–2030 and supported by the FAO Food Safety Priorities 2022–2031.
7. Convene INFOSAN regional virtual meetings annually.
8. Strengthening country capacities in food safety incident reporting and management, and utilization of new technologies such as AI to improve access to information and the timely management of foodborne risks.
9. Establish formal links with the regional networks facilitating the dissemination of food safety incident information and reporting, such as the Arab Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed initiative.
10. Organize tailored national workshops for priority countries with capacity scores 1 and 2 (as reported through the IHR-SPAR).
11. Deliver regional workshops on multisectoral collaboration mechanisms and good practices to establish operational links between INFOSAN members and IHR focal points.
12. Strive for a 100% active representation in INFOSAN by countries of the WHO Eastern Mediterranean and FAO Near East and North Africa regions.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The meeting served as a valuable platform for fostering dialogue among countries in the WHO Eastern Mediterranean and FAO Near East and North Africa regions, strengthening national, regional and international partnerships, and addressing emerging food safety challenges.



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