

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE WESTERN PACIFIC

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MEETING REPORT

VIRTUAL ROUNDTABLES: ADVANCING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE
REGIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR ACTION ON FOOD SAFETY IN THE WESTERN
PACIFIC

Convened by:

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE WESTERN PACIFIC

Virtual meeting
16, 18, 22, 26 and 29 March 2021

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NOTE

The views expressed in this report are those of the participants of the Virtual Roundtables: Advancing the Implementation of the Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific and do not necessarily reflect the policies of the conveners.

This report has been prepared by the World Health Organization Regional Office for the Western Pacific for Member States in the Region and for those who participated in the Virtual Roundtables: Advancing the Implementation of the Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific on 16, 18, 22, 26 and 29 March 2021.

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SUMMARY

Every year, unsafe food sickens hundreds of millions and kills hundreds of thousands of people, especially in low- and middle-income countries in Asia and Africa. Unsafe food also costs the world an estimated US\$ 110 billion in lost productivity and medical expenses each year, according to the World Bank. Recognizing the challenges for food safety systems across the Western Pacific Region, the World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Committee in 2017 endorsed the Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific to be implemented from 2018 to 2025. This Regional Framework provides strategic guidance and a stepwise approach for Member States to strengthen their food safety systems.

Over the past three years, Member States have made progress in strengthening food safety systems with the Framework, which has also been used as a reference in other WHO regions and globally. The harmonization of food safety systems globally aims to protect human health and facilitate fair food trade – an important consideration given the fractured approaches of many countries where food safety is managed by many ministries.

The Virtual Roundtables: Advancing the Implementation of the Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific was held on 16, 18, 19, 22, 26 and 29 March 2021. The meeting was organized in five sessions, one for each action area of the Regional Framework, and consisted of presentations and experience sharing by international and national experts. The topics for the five sessions were: (1) Food safety policy and legal frameworks; (2) Risk-based food inspection and enforcement; (3) Food safety information underpinning evidence; (4) Food safety incident and emergency response; and (5) Food safety communications and education. The event provided an opportunity for WHO Member States in the Western Pacific Region to update each other and exchange experiences on progress made in the implementation of the Regional Framework.

During the meeting, diverse approaches and strategies were recognized, and different levels of implementation of the Regional Framework were observed. This diversity represents a challenge for the development of regional actions by the WHO Regional Office and requires a specific approach for the Pacific island countries and areas. Likewise, it was possible to recognize the need to strengthen the assessment mechanisms to evaluate the progress in the implementation of the Regional Framework.

WHO in the Western Pacific Region continues to support Member States to strengthen their national food safety systems through the implementation of the Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Workshop organization

Virtual Roundtables: Advancing the Implementation of the Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific was held on 16, 18, 22, 26 and 29 March 2021. The Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific, which was endorsed by the WHO Regional Committee in 2017, acknowledges the changing context of food safety and provides strategic guidance and a stepwise approach for Member States to strengthen their food safety systems. The event featured a series of presentations and plenaries distributed in five thematic daily sessions. It provided an opportunity for Member States in the Western Pacific Region to update each other on progress made in the implementation of the Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety and to learn from experts from around the world.

1.2 Objectives

The objectives of the virtual roundtables were:

- 1) to identify common priorities and innovative approaches to strengthen the implementation of the Regional Framework;
- 2) to discuss the strategic actions of each area of the Regional Framework in order to achieve a higher level of food safety, considering countries' needs and resources; and
- 3) to share experiences, success factors and challenges for strengthening national food safety systems.

2. PROCEEDINGS

During the five sessions, a total of 106 participants attended the meetings, including representatives from the governments of 19 Member States in the Western Pacific Region, namely Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, China, Cook Islands, Fiji, Japan, the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Mongolia, New Zealand, Niue, the Philippines, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Singapore, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Viet Nam. The WHO Secretariat included staff from WHO headquarters, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia and country offices. Observers who attended the meeting were from the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), Fiji National University, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), National Health Commission of the People's Republic of China and World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE). A list of participants is in Annex 2.

2.1 Opening session

Dr Simone Moraes Raszl, Technical Officer, Food Safety, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, welcomed participants to the meeting. She highlighted that the general purpose of the event was to generate a space for sharing experiences, success factors and challenges for strengthening the national food safety systems of Member States in the Western Pacific Region.

Dr Takeshi Kasai, WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific, welcomed the participants and acknowledged the representation of all the Member States of the Region. Dr Kasai highlighted the impact of foodborne diseases on public health and socioeconomic issues in the Western Pacific Region. He outlined that the implementation of the Regional Framework is crucial to reduce the occurrence of foodborne outbreaks that stress our health systems. Dr Kasai mentioned that countries may use this approach to identify priority strategic action to strengthen the uniformity of food safety systems at their respective stages of development. Dr Kasai congratulated and acknowledged the efforts made by the Western Pacific Member States for advancing implementation of the Regional Framework, especially over the last year when the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic repurposed personnel and resources to the response.

Dr Babatunde Olowokure, Director, Division of Health Security and Emergencies, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific, also welcomed the participants. Dr Olowokure emphasized that foodborne diseases and food contamination events highlight the need to secure public access to safe and healthy food. He mentioned that food safety is an important component of health security and emergencies in the Region and outlined that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted many areas, including food control programmes. Unsafe food affects food security and hampers the development of nations through high costs of lost productivity and medical expenses. Given this, as he said, it is necessary to advocate for high-level authorities to understand that food safety is complex in nature and needs to be recognized as a priority for health, nutrition, food security and development.

Dr Francesco Branca, Director, Department of Nutrition and Food Safety, WHO headquarters, sent a video message. Dr Branca outlined that the Regional Framework allows for the building of trust and confidence in food safety systems, based on the key concept that food safety is everyone's business. With the adoption of a resolution on food safety at the seventy-third session of the World Health Assembly, Member States have recognized the urgent need to improve the world's food safety systems so that they can proactively face new challenges. The pressure of current global conditions and the complexity of food safety problems call for the holistic perspective of the One Health approach.

Dr Guilherme Antonio da Costa Junior, Chairperson of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, highlighted the role of the Commission as a multilateral organization that helps developing countries to apply its standards, strengthen their national food control systems and take advantage of international food trade opportunities.

2.2 Session 1. Food safety policy and legal frameworks

Dr Simone Moraes Raszl moderated the session on food safety policy and legal frameworks. One specialist lecture and two country presentations were conducted on this topic.

2.2.1 Specialist lecture

Dr Annamaria Bruno, Former Senior Food Standards Officer, Codex Alimentarius Secretariat, FAO, explained that foodborne diseases have a major impact on health and the global economy, including a negative impact on international food trade.

Common food safety issues in the Western Pacific, such as aflatoxins, have a great impact on people's health. The Pacific islands present special food safety risk factors associated with high vulnerability and dependence on food imports, limited institutional frameworks, gaps in laboratory analysis capacity and other factors.

The complexity of global factors affecting food safety was noted, including technological factors, trade processes, organization of food chains (including consumer awareness, globalization, speed of communication, country reputation, interrelationship with tourism and gastronomy and others), factors related to sociodemographic changes, media and others. In the Western Pacific, some additional factors that represent specific challenges are malnutrition and a high concentration of people.

To face the complex nature of food safety problems, it is necessary to apply approaches that include interdisciplinary measures and interventions for food safety, in particular the One Health approach, with multistakeholder participation, collaboration and communication. The significant role that food legislation plays in overcoming these challenges was emphasized.

The keys to developing an adequate food law framework include the application of principles of harmonization, coordination and recognition of multiple responsibilities. Harmonization is a fundamental element for strengthening food safety systems, reducing barriers to international trade, and facilitating compliance with World Trade Organization (WTO) measures and agreements.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission plays an important role in the development of food standards that contribute to the harmonization of food legislation at the international level. The active participation of members from various countries is fundamental and allows the strengthening of the different Codex Alimentarius committees.

2.2.2 Country presentation

The first presentation was performed by Dr Joanne Chan Sheot Harn, Director of the National Centre for Food Science, Singapore Food Agency and WHO Collaborating Centre on Food Contamination Monitoring. During the last years, the work of the Singapore Food Agency has been important to achieve food safety control. However, the shared responsibility and participation of other stakeholders, such as consumers and the private sector, was essential to achieve comprehensive food safety control. Singapore is characterized by low domestic production capacity and high dependence on food imports. This condition has closely influenced the development of the National Food Safety System, orienting many of the food control strategies to imported foods

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