

FAO, WHO Urge Countries To Be More Vigilant About Food Safety

FAO and WHO are urging all countries to strengthen their food safety systems and to be far more vigilant with food producers and traders.

Recent food safety incidents, like the discovery of the industrial chemical melamine in animal and fish feed, or the unauthorized use of certain veterinary drugs in intensive aquaculture, can affect health and often lead to rejections of food products in international trade.

Such food safety incidents are often caused by lack of knowledge of food safety requirements and of their implications, or by the illegal or fraudulent use of ingredients including unauthorised food additives or veterinary drugs.

During the last 12 months, an average of up to 200 food safety incidents per month have been investigated by WHO and FAO to determine their public health impact.

Information about food safety incidents of international significance was shared with countries through the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN).

“Food safety is an issue for every country and ultimately every food consumer. All countries can benefit from taking stronger measures to fill safety gaps in the sometimes considerable journey food takes from the farm to the table,” said Jørgen Schlundt, Director of WHO's Department of Food Safety, Zoonoses and Foodborne Diseases.

“Countries are only able to keep their shares in globalized food markets and the trust of consumers if they apply internationally agreed food quality and safety standards,” said Ezzeddine Boutrif, Director of FAO's Nutrition and Consumer Protection Division. “Consumers have a right to be informed about potential hazards in food and to be protected against them.”

Inadequate food safety systems

Weak food safety systems can lead to a higher incidence of food safety problems and diseases caused by micro-organisms such as Salmonella, E. coli, Campylobacter, and Listeria, by residues of agricultural chemicals (pesticides, veterinary drugs, etc) and by the use of unauthorized food additives. Diarrhoeal diseases alone, due mainly to unsafe food and water, kill 1.8 million children every year.

Food production systems in developing countries are facing a series of challenges: population growth and urbanization, changing dietary patterns, intensification and industrialization of food and agricultural production. Climate conditions, poor sanitation and weak public infrastructure compound these difficulties.

Food safety legislation in many developing countries is often incomplete or obsolete or not in line with international requirements. Responsibility for food safety and control tends to be dispersed across many institutions. Laboratories lack essential equipment and supplies.

Many developed countries are in similar situations with fragmented food safety systems that often do not include or cover primary production where many food safety issues originate. For example the spread in recent years of new Salmonella strains in poultry originated in developed countries and was spread globally through trade.

In order to ensure safe food production for their own consumers and to meet international sanitary and phytosanitary requirements for food exports, national food safety authorities should be more vigilant. Producers and traders should be held accountable for safe food production throughout the food chain.

The rules of the World Trade Organization stipulate that developed countries help exporting developing countries to achieve the necessary high level of food safety for international trade. This assistance should contribute to building or strengthening integrated national food safety systems covering the entire food chain. This often requires long-term multi-billion dollar investments and technical advice.

Supporting food safety

FAO and WHO are supporting national governments to improve the institutional set up and the performance of food inspection, enforcement, laboratory analysis and diagnosis, certification, food-borne disease surveillance, emergency preparedness and response. They also provide scientific advice on many food safety issues such as food additives, chemical and microbiological contaminants, and agro-chemical residues.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission established by FAO and WHO develops science and risk based food safety standards that are a reference in international trade and a model for countries to use in their legislation. The application of these standards and guidelines would ensure food safety and consumer protection.

About the Author

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