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FOOD SAFETY

In 2011, the Regional Committee for the Western Pacific endorsed the *Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011–2015*. The strategy proposed priority actions to help ensure safe and healthy food by strengthening national food safety systems. The evaluation of the strategy showed good progress in strengthening the core components of national food safety systems and contributed to achieving the International Health Regulations core capacities for food safety.

However, the context of food safety is changing and has made food safety risk management more complex and challenging. In the new reality of food safety, public demand for safe food has increased and the conditions under which food is produced, traded, distributed and consumed have changed. Enhancing food safety in the Western Pacific requires a new approach including a new strategic direction for strengthening national food safety systems. Extensive bottom–up consultations with Member States, experts and partners have revealed new ways to strengthen food safety systems to better manage emerging food safety issues.

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific is requested to consider for endorsement the *draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific*.

1. CURRENT SITUATION

The impact of foodborne diseases on public health and the economy is staggering: more than 600 million people fall ill and 420 000 die every year from foodborne diseases in the world. In the Western Pacific Region, approximately 125 million people fall ill and more than 50 000 die every year from consuming unsafe food. Food safety is more than a key health issue; it is also an issue related to trade and economic development.

In October 2011, the Regional Committee for the Western Pacific endorsed the *Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011–2015*. It identifies priority strategic actions required to help ensure safe and healthy food. The Strategy contributed to strengthening the key components of national food safety systems. It also helped Member States achieve the International Health Regulations or IHR (2005) core capacities for food safety, with an improvement from 69% to 85% between 2010 and 2015. Moreover, the Strategy strengthened cooperation between countries and development partners, and increased understanding of the importance of food safety as a health issue. Notwithstanding the good progress made under the Strategy, there was significant variation from country to country.

Food safety remains a priority for the Region. It is a fundamental element of good health and essential for sustainable development. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for action to eliminate poverty and hunger and improve nutrition, while promoting sustainable agriculture in order to achieve food security. If the overarching goal of the SDGs – to leave no one behind as development advances – is to be achieved, all people must have access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food at all times.

In 2015, the Regional Committee for the Western Pacific stressed the continuing relevance of the *Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011–2015*. At the same time, the Regional Committee recognized the need for a new approach to strengthen national food safety systems and a common platform to prioritize food safety action.

The draft Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific was developed through a bottom–up consultation process with Member States, experts and partners spanning 18 months to ensure a technically robust framework that addresses emerging food safety issues and that can be implemented at country and regional levels. The draft Action Framework builds on the achievements and lessons learnt from the previous Strategy. It goes further, however, to strengthen food safety systems as holistic and homogeneous entities.

2. ISSUES

There continues to be a need for a common regional framework for strengthening food safety in the Western Pacific, particularly updating the approach to strengthen national food safety systems.

2.1 The context of food safety is changing

In recent years, technological advances, demographic changes and socioeconomic developments have affected work on food safety in the Western Pacific Region. The changing context of food safety has made food safety risk management more complex and challenging. Increasing use of information technology including social media and other online communication channels has made access to food safety information (official and unofficial) easier than ever. This has affected how consumers perceive food safety risks and contributed to them becoming more critical and demanding. New food production techniques and advancements in food analysis methods require continuous adaptation and investments in implementation of food control measures. International trade in food and agricultural products has expanded and increased the risk of unsafe food rapidly spreading within and beyond borders. The changing context of food safety has increased the complexity of managing food safety risks and responding to food safety incidents and emergencies. This new reality calls for new ways to manage food safety.

2.2 Food safety risks cannot be eliminated

Everybody can produce and sell food, and everybody eats – which means everybody is at risk of being exposed to unsafe food. Food safety risks cannot be eliminated, only reduced. It is not possible to control the safety of all food products available to consumers. Instead, food safety risk management needs to focus on the process of producing safe food, identify where food safety risks are highest and implement control measures accordingly. All countries have limited resources available for food safety. Adopting a risk-based approach to managing food safety risk contributes to making better use of existing resources. It also calls for a shift from focusing on the safety of food products to managing food safety risks by implementing appropriate control measures along the entire food chain continuum. This requires: consistency and coherence in food policy and legislation; better food safety information and evidence; competent stakeholders with the necessary knowledge, skills, attitude and behaviour to manage food safety; and trust and confidence over time in the safety of the food supply.

2.3 Food safety systems are at different levels of development

Food safety systems consist of various interrelated and interdependent stakeholders and core components including food safety policy and legislation, inspection and enforcement, information and evidence, incident and emergency response, and communications and education. In the Western Pacific Region, national food safety systems are at different stages of development. Countries have different priorities and varying means to address food safety issues. As such, efforts to strengthen national food safety systems across the Region must adopt a stepwise approach that considers the country context, needs and priorities. Food safety interventions must prioritize system strengthening, recognizing the interconnected nature of food safety efforts. Regardless of a country's initial capacity, this systems-based approach aims to help build food safety systems as holistic and homogeneous entities that follow the path of food from farm to plate to ensure its safety.

3. ACTIONS PROPOSED

The Regional Committee for the Western Pacific is requested to consider for endorsement the draft *Regional Framework for Action on Food Safety in the Western Pacific*.