

SUMMARY OF EVALUATION OF THE WESTERN PACIFIC REGIONAL FOOD SAFETY STRATEGY 2011–2015

Background

In 2011, the WHO Regional Committee for the Western Pacific endorsed the *Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011–2015* (WPR/RC62.R5). The Strategy identified priority strategic actions required to strengthen national food safety systems to help ensure safe and healthy food. It centred on six themes: 1) improved food control and coordination throughout the food chain continuum and adequate funding; 2) risk-based regulatory frameworks; 3) improved availability of food safety data to better guide policy and risk analysis; 4) inspection services; 5) food safety training and education; and 6) capacity to detect, assess and manage food safety incidents and emergencies. The Strategy also stressed the importance of enhanced cooperative planning and implementation of regional and subregional food safety strategies and action plans.

Methodology

The evaluation reviewed Member State implementation of the International Health Regulations or IHR (2005) core capacities for food safety, as well as national and regional activities to support implementation of the *Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011–2015*. The evaluation also included country visits and informal interaction with Member States and technical experts on achievements and lessons learnt in food safety. The *Progress Report on Implementing the Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011–2015* highlighted achievements and challenges in implementation of the Strategy from September 2011 to 2014.

Meetings on strengthening the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) in Asia and national food safety systems were held in 2013 and 2015 respectively. The meetings served to review progress and identify challenges and issues for strengthening national food safety systems in Asia.

In 2016, informal consultations with technical experts were held to assess implementation of the Strategy and to seek advice on future priorities and approaches for strengthening national food safety systems in the Region.

Findings

The *Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011–2015* has contributed to good progress in strengthening national food safety systems. It has guided action to improve national food control efforts and to strengthen key components of national food safety systems. The Strategy also helped foster cooperation between countries and development partners and position food safety as an important health issue.

Improvements have been observed throughout the six themes of the Strategy. However, progress has varied between Member States and between the different themes of the Strategy. Member States have made good progress on implementation of the IHR core capacities for food safety. The overall implementation of the food safety core capacities, among the Member States that responded to the annual IHR monitoring questionnaire, increased from 69% in 2010 to 85% in 2015. However, there was significant variation from country to country.

The Regional Food Safety Strategy supported food safety authorities in improving food control and coordination throughout the food chain continuum. Among the countries that responded to the IHR questionnaire, the percentage of countries that have implemented food safety control management systems increased from 77% in 2012 to 89% in 2015. Meanwhile, the percentage of countries with a mechanism in place for multisectoral collaboration for food safety events increased from 65% to 95%. However, the functioning and sustainability of multisectoral collaboration mechanisms have been challenging, as food safety strategies, policies and plans have often been developed inconsistently across sectors. This limits the effectiveness of systems in addressing cross-sector food safety issues and makes leadership in food safety risk management less clear.

Good progress has taken place in developing food laws and regulations in line with regional priorities and the internationally recognized standards of the Codex Alimentarius. Among the countries that responded to the IHR questionnaire, the proportion of countries with food safety standards available increased from 88% in 2012 to 95% in 2015 and that of countries with food laws, regulations or policies in place increased from 96% to 100%. However, assuring coherence of regulatory frameworks across various sectors and adequate capacity for compliance and enforcement has been identified as a key challenge.

Improvements in foodborne disease surveillance, investigation and response were observed, including implementation of total diet studies. Among respondents to the IHR questionnaire, the proportion of countries that systematically collect and analyse epidemiological data related to food contamination increased from 65% in 2012 to 68% in 2015. Countries with timely and systematic information exchange between food safety authorities, surveillance units and other relevant sectors

increased from 65% to 95% over the same time. However, the use of foodborne disease surveillance and food monitoring data to effectively guide policy and risk analysis continued to be a challenge for evidence-based policy-making.

An emerging shift from traditional food inspection and enforcement activities to risk-based food inspection has taken place. According to data collected through the annual IHR monitoring questionnaire in 2015, 89% of Member States had risk-based food inspection services in place. A high number of food inspectors were trained in the principles and practices of risk-based food inspection, and training curricula and guidance documents were developed. More emphasis was placed on training food inspectors than on building systems for risk-based food inspection. As a result, inspectors faced difficulties in adopting a risk-based approach and improving practices over time.

Mandatory national food safety training programmes, education curricula and material for food handlers have been developed. Several training sessions were conducted and food safety advocacy activities were implemented. This included the World Health Day 2015 focus on food safety. Among respondents to the IHR questionnaire, the proportion of countries with communication mechanisms and materials ready to deliver information, education and advice to stakeholders across the farm-to-fork continuum increased from 77% in 2012 to 79% in 2015. Food safety training programmes contributed to improved awareness of risk factors, but changes in behaviour were less pronounced. Limited involvement of food businesses in the development and implementation of food safety training and education activities, as well as inconsistent funding, affected the effectiveness and sustainability of food safety training and education efforts.

Among respondents to the IHR questionnaire, the proportion of countries with operational plans to respond to food safety events increased from 50% in 2012 to 79% in 2015. A series of biregional meetings with Member States in the WHO South-East Asia and Western Pacific regions contributed to enhanced country use of INFOSAN to rapidly share food safety information. In 2014, more than half (55%) of INFOSAN members in the two regions were involved in a food safety event reported through INFOSAN. In three out of four cases, the INFOSAN emergency contact point acknowledged receipt of the information in the required 24-hour time frame. However, limited availability of information related to food safety incidents and emergencies and unclear lines of INFOSAN communication at the country level restricted the effectiveness of country participation in INFOSAN.

The Food Safety Cooperation Working Group has been established and provides a forum for information sharing among partners working in food safety for improved coordination of capacity-building activities.

Informal consultations with technical experts and Member States identified the changing context of food safety and the component-based approach to strengthen national food safety systems as issues affecting country progress.

Conclusions

Good progress has been made in strengthening national food safety systems including Member State implementation of IHR core capacities for food safety. However, the changing context of food safety has increased the complexity of managing food safety risks and responding to food safety incidents and emergencies and has limited countries from advancing further.

Food safety remains a key public health issue for the Western Pacific Region. Food safety policy and legislation, risk-based food inspection and enforcement, food safety information and evidence, incident and emergency response, and food safety communications and education remain essential core components of food safety systems and action areas for improvement.

The evolving context and increasing complexity of food safety risk management require a new approach to address future food safety issues in the Region.