Meeting on Strengthening INFOSAN and National Food Control Systems in Asia

10–12 December 2013
Manila, Philippines
REPORT

ON THE MEETING ON STRENGTHENING INFOSAN
AND NATIONAL FOOD CONTROL SYSTEMS IN ASIA

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NOTE

The views expressed in this report are those of the participants who attended the Meeting on Strengthening INFOSAN and National Food Control Systems in Asia and do not necessarily reflect the policies of the Organization.
SUMMARY

The Meeting on Strengthening INFOSAN and National Food Control Systems in Asia was held in Manila, Philippines from 10 to 12 December 2013.

The objectives of the meeting were:

(1) to provide a global update on INFOSAN strategic directions and activities and review regional progress of and challenges in strengthening INFOSAN in Asia;

(2) to review country progress in strengthening national food control systems in line with relevant regional food safety strategies; and

(3) to identify priority activities for strengthening INFOSAN and developing national food safety capacity in Asia.

Member States have made good progress in strengthening INFOSAN and national food control systems. Countries’ compliance with the food safety requirements of the International Health Regulations (IHR) is improving and capacity to prepare and response to food safety emergencies has been strengthened. Several countries reported on new food legislation and enforcement structures being implemented as well as stronger linkages between national IHR focal points and INFOSAN focal points and emergency contact points.

Recent examples of food safety incidents showed how countries have strengthened structures and mechanisms for preparedness and response to foodborne disease outbreaks and communication with counterparts in other countries and the wider global food safety community. Progress has been guided by the Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011-2015 and the SEARO Regional Food Safety Strategy 2013-2017. The Strategy for Enhancing INFOSAN in Asia has also contributed to strengthening collaboration; coordination; and exchange of food safety information between countries in Asia and between countries and the INFOSAN Secretariat

The Meeting contributed to increasing participants understanding of their roles and responsibilities as INFOSAN members and provided advice and action items for follow-up as they pertain to activities under the Strategy for Enhancing INFOSAN in Asia. The Meeting also considered key factors for success in strengthening national food control systems; identified challenges and constraints; and discussed options for interventions to overcome challenges and support national food control systems strengthening.

In conclusion it was recommended that countries strengthen in-country cross-programme linkages and communication mechanisms as well as actively engage in communication with the INFOSAN Secretariat and other INFOSAN members. It was also recommended that countries develop plans for strengthening national food control systems in line with relevant regional strategies and that WHO and FAO provide technical supports, as needed. Countries were also encouraged to put in place mechanisms to monitor and evaluate progress on national food control systems strengthening and to use existing monitoring tools such as the IHR core capacity monitoring questionnaire.

It was proposed to hold the next regional meeting on Strengthening INFOSAN and National Food Control Systems in Asia in early 2015.
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1. INTRODUCTION

Ensuring food safety and preventing foodborne diseases is an international public health concern. Food safety authorities around the world are constantly challenged by changes in microorganisms and new chemicals associated with food, as well as changes in food production techniques and consumer behaviours, which lead to new risks to the public. To combat these challenges, it is critical that food safety authorities around the globe collaborate and share information and experiences. Food safety hazards can easily spread from one country to another and with increased global travel and trade, the risk of cross-border food safety incidents and emergencies increases.

The International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN), is a joint programme between the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO). INFOSAN facilitates sharing of information between countries and help countries taking appropriate action on food safety events that threatens human health.

In May 2010, the World Health Assembly (WHA) adopted a resolution on Advancing Food Safety Initiatives re-enforcing the importance of INFOSAN. The resolution encourages participation of all Member States in INFOSAN and its related activities. It calls for further development of INFOSAN and supports the strengthening of the emergency functions of INFOSAN, recognising the Network as critical for preventing and responding to food safety incidents and emergencies.

The first global meeting of INFOSAN in 2010 agreed to the development of regionally-based strategies for enhancing countries’ participation in INFOSAN. Building on this agreement, the meeting “Enhancing Food Safety Information Exchange and Emergency Response Capacity to Support Participation in INFOSAN” was held for countries in Asia in September 2011 in Seoul, Republic of Korea. The meeting discussed the concept of “INFOSAN in Asia” and the need for developing a regionally-based strategy for enhancing participation in INFOSAN across Asia. In November 2012, the meeting “Enhancing INFOSAN in Asia and Implementation of
Regional Food Safety Strategies” was held and the draft “Strategy for Enhancing INFOSAN in Asia” was discussed.

In order to continue the work on strengthening INFOSAN in Asia and implementation of the Regional INFOSAN Strategy, the Meeting on Strengthening INFOSAN and National Food Control Systems in Asia was held at the WHO Western Pacific Regional Office in Manila, Philippines from 10 to 12 December 2013.

1.1 Objectives

The objectives of the meeting were:

(1) to provide a global update on INFOSAN strategic directions and activities and review regional progress of and challenges in strengthening INFOSAN in Asia;

(2) to review country progress in strengthening national food control systems in line with relevant regional food safety strategies; and

(3) to identify priority activities for strengthening INFOSAN and developing national food safety capacity in Asia.

1.2 Organization

The meeting was jointly convened by the World Health Organisation Regional Offices for the Western Pacific (WPRO) and South-East Asia (SEARO), the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) Secretariat, and in collaboration with and support from the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety, Republic of Korea. Participants from the Western Pacific and South-East Asia Region, observers from the Asian Development Bank, Consumers International, International Life Sciences Institute, the World Organisation for Animal Health, and Food and Environmental Hygiene Department, the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety, Republic of Korea, and National Food Safety Information Service of Korea attended the meeting.

At the inaugural session, Dr Chen Junshi, Senior Research Professor, National Centre for Food Safety Risk Assessment, China was elected as overall Chairperson for the meeting. Each plenary session was chaired by selected country representatives as per Annex 3. Professor Alan Reilly, Chief Executive, Food Safety Authority of Ireland agreed to be Rapporteur.

1.3 Opening Ceremony

Dr Han Tieru, Director, Programme Management, WHO Western Pacific Regional Office delivered Opening Remarks on behalf of Dr Shin Young-soo, WHO Regional Director for the Western Pacific and Dr Samlee Plianbangchang, WHO Regional Director for the South-East Asia. Dr Tieru conveyed his appreciation to the Government of Korea for hosting the previous Meeting on Strengthening INFOSAN in Asia in 2012 and for supporting the organisation of this year’s meeting. He stressed that WHO recognises food safety as a growing health security issue and has placed great importance in supporting countries in strengthening food safety activities at national level. He also mentioned that Codex Alimentarius and INFOSAN are important international platforms for harmonized food standards setting and improved exchange of information between countries. Dr Tieru emphasized that addressing the global food safety challenge requires countries to work together.
The WHO Regional Food Safety Strategies for SEARO and WPRO as well as the Strategy for Enhancing INFOSAN in Asia are all key guidance documents that encourage countries to actively collaborate and share information on food safety. Dr Tieru also stressed that food safety scares are inevitable and the best way to manage food safety events is to prepare and develop food safety emergency response plans that are linked with broader public health emergency preparedness and response plans. Dr Tieru ended his speech by re-emphasizing that WHO together with the FAO is committed to working with countries to secure safer food for their people.

Ms Shashi Sareen, Senior Food and Nutrition Officer, FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific delivered Opening Remarks on behalf of FAO. Ms Sareen appreciated WHO for organising and hosting the meeting. She highlighted that INFOSAN is a very important network for rapid information sharing during food safety events. She also mentioned that strengthening national food control systems in Asia is a priority and an issue that requires collaboration between all stakeholders along the food chain continuum. An effective national food control system consists of up-to-date food laws and regulations, risk-based food inspection services, emergency response capacity and on-going education, awareness raising and risk communication. In Asia, many gaps still exist in national food control systems and food safety is still a serious public health concern. She mentioned that FAO’s activities in the area of food safety include a broad range of interventions including identification of food safety indicators, strengthening food import control systems, harmonization of food standards and coordination between countries and between different sectors with each country. She stressed that the Meeting would provide a good forum for taking stock of the current situation and discussing the best way forward to strengthening INFOSAN and national food control systems in Asia.
2. PROCEEDINGS

2.1 Plenary 1: Global update on food safety

2.1.1 Global update on food safety

Dr Kazuaki Miyagishima, Director, Department of Food Safety and Zoonoses explained about the global nature of our food supply which allows for foodborne hazards to quickly travel from one source to another without respecting national borders. Isolated national systems are therefore insufficient for managing foodborne diseases including zoonoses. Individual bi- or multi-lateral agreements can be time consuming to arrange and are often too specific to provide an effective means of information exchange in times of crisis. In addition, the increasing complexity of products, manufacturing methods and the supply chain necessitate the need for a global monitoring and responsive approach.

Ensuring global food safety presents numerous challenges. First, coordination across sectors is required and various areas of expertise need to be combined. The fragmentation of governmental agencies can make this difficult. It can also be a challenge to maintain attention and resources for food safety, for which the importance is often only highlighted when a large outbreak is made public in the media. The food industry has the main responsibility for ensuring food is safe but public-private partnerships can introduce conflicts of interests and need to be managed carefully. Finally, different countries have different profiles and priorities for food safety depending on domestic food production and the levels of food exportation versus food importation.

Dr Miyagishima also explained that the global food safety programme at WHO should be considered a hub programme for One Health, bridging nutrition, water and sanitation, chemical safety, maternal and child health and zoonosis control – thereby championing intersectoral collaboration and linking together legal or voluntary instruments like International Health Regulations (IHR), Codex, and INFOSAN.

To continue working towards global food safety, the World Health Organization has developed a strategic plan, for the period 2013 to 2022, which outlines three strategic directions:

1. Provide the science base for measures along the food-chain;

2. Improve national and international collaboration between sectors (agriculture, veterinary and human health) and enhance communication and advocacy; and

3. Provide leadership and assist in the development and strengthening of risk-based, integrated national systems for food safety.

Food safety is an essential element in improving global health and ensuring sustainable development and it is only by acting together that can we respond effectively to international threats and ensure safer food for everyone.
2.1.2 Global update on food safety and Codex work

Ms Shashi Sareen, Senior Food and Nutrition Officer, FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, on behalf of FAO Headquarters, provided a global update on FAO’s food safety work. Three basic aspects were presented, firstly FAO’s new Strategic Approach comprising five strategic objectives which will be the areas of focus of FAO in the coming years; FAO’s new food safety strategy; and an overview of the new food safety tools under development in FAO at the global level.

FAO’s global goals include sustainable reduction of hunger and malnutrition; elimination of poverty through economics and social progress; and management of natural resources. Under these there are five strategic objectives under which FAO’s work is covered. This includes Strategic Objective (SO)1 Eradicate hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition; SO2 Increase and improve provision of goods and services from agriculture, forestry and fisheries in a sustainable manner; SO3 Reduce rural poverty; SO4 Enable more inclusive and efficient food and agricultural systems at local, national and international levels; and SO5 Increase the resilience of livelihoods to threats and crises. FAO’s food safety strategy at global level comprises improving measureable improvements in national systems of food control through action at national, regional and global levels; global involvement in the setting of agreed international food standards, codes of practice and guidelines that are science based; enabling implementation of good food safety management practices at all stages of the food chain; and identification, communication and evaluation of emerging, re-emerging and current food safety issues.

The new tools under development cover a food control assessment tool which focuses on assessing a food control system in its various dimensions; a risk communication tool, the objective of which is to share good risk communication principles, practices and lessons-learned in food safety (within the contexts of regular risk analysis and emergencies); a food legislation tool the objective of which is to provide guidance on developing modern and coherent food safety legislation and support training on food legislation drafting; a risk analysis tools which will cover risk profiling, data selection, collection and use, and risk prioritization and ranking; a multicriteria decision analysis tool which addresses the need for more systematic, transparent, evidence based approaches to decision making in relation to investment in public food control and food safety programs; a mycotoxin sampling tool which provides support in analysing performance of sampling plans, and determining the most appropriate plan to meet user’s defined objectives; an empres food safety and guidance tool to support national preparedness for responding to food safety emergencies.

2.1.3 IHR implementation: Opportunity for food safety

Dr Ailan Li, Director, Health Security and Emergencies, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific Region delivered a presentation on IHR implementation and the opportunities for food safety. IHR is a legally binding set of regulations that came into force in 2007. The purpose of IHR is to prevent; protect against; control; and provide a public health response to the international spread of disease in ways that are commensurate with and restricted to public health risks, and which avoid unnecessary interference with international traffic and trade. The IHR provides a collective, effective global alert and response system that minimizes negative impact on health, economic and social development from acute public health events and emergencies.
Dr Ailan also introduced the Asia Pacific Strategy for Emerging Diseases (APSED) as a common strategy for managing emerging infectious disease threats and public health emergencies. The APSED 2010 consists of eight capacity areas which relate to five objectives and a common goal. The APSED approach focuses on common capacities such as event-based surveillance; rapid response; risk communication; emergency preparedness and response logistics to strengthen countries' capacity to strengthen health security. APSED takes a step-wise approach starting with focus on building capacity in specific technical areas to focus on strengthening cross-cutting capacities and linking technical areas for a functioning system. Implementation of APSED has contributed to strengthen countries' surveillance, coordination and communication capacity on public health threats.

Surveillance data shows that in the SEARO and WPRO regions, infectious disease is the main hazard for public health. In WPRO, food safety is also among the main hazards for public health. The deadline for complying with the IHR was June 2012. In the SEARO region, 11 out of 11 countries requested for extension while in the WPRO region 14 out of 27 countries opted for a two years extension of the deadline.

Dr Ailan ended her presentation re-emphasizing that IHR provides a common global legal framework for protecting public health security while APSED focuses on critical cross-cutting capacities including surveillance, risk assessment and response. Within this overall strategic framework, the Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011-2015 provides guidance for Member States on strengthening food safety and national food control systems. The way forward for cross-programme collaboration includes risk reduction and prevention; surveillance, risk assessment and response; risk communication; public health emergency planning; strengthened linkages between IHR and INFOSAN; as well as IHR core capacity monitoring.

2.1.4 INFOSAN: Progress and strategic directions

Dr Peter Karim Ben Embarek, Scientist, Department of Food Safety and Zoonoses, WHO Headquarters presented about progress and strategic directions for INFOSAN. He informed that 181 countries are members of INFOSAN. On-going efforts continue to encourage the designation of the full range of Focal Points from national authorities involved in food safety. Since last year, approximately 50 new INFOSAN members have been designated from national veterinary sectors with thanks to the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) for encouraging this collaboration.

During 2013, the INFOSAN Secretariat dealt with 47 food safety events. Several events have garnered international media attention including: numerous outbreaks of hepatitis A linked to frozen berries; an international outbreak of salmonellosis linked to sesame paste from Turkey; an international recall of whey protein concentrate from NZ due to potential contamination with clostridia bacteria; and most recently, the international outbreak of acute non-viral hepatitis associated with dietary supplement products from the USA. Also during the past year, the INFOSAN Secretariat participated in two international food safety emergency simulation exercises.
Looking forward to 2014 and 2015, the INFOSAN Secretariat will focus on three key areas including:

(1) Emergency INFOSAN Activities: detection, assessment and management of food safety events of international concern;

(2) Routine INFOSAN Activities: development of guidance documents to assist member states in managing food safety events; publication of INFOSAN Notes; and strengthening of links to other regional networks; and

(3) Community Strengthening Activities: improvement of communication among INFOSAN members; further development the INFOSAN Community Website.

The APEC Food Safety Incident Network (FSIN) may launch its new portal within the INFOSAN Community Network in 2014. This kind of regional initiative to strengthen participation in INFOSAN will help to pool limited resources in order to achieve common goals for safer food around the globe.

2.2 Plenary 2: Strengthening INFOSAN in Asia

2.2.1 Strategy for enhancing INFOSAN in Asia

Mr Carmen Savelli, Project Officer, Department of Food Safety and Zoonoses, WHO Headquarters explained about the strategy for enhancing INFOSAN in Asia. He started by presenting the evolution of INFOSAN in Asia. The idea to focus on strengthening INFOSAN in Asia spawned from an initial recommendation made at the first global meeting of INFOSAN in 2010 to develop regional strategies. After two regional meetings in 2011 and 2012, the Strategy for Enhancing INFOSAN in Asia was drafted and published in 2013.

Two examples of recent food safety events were presented to highlight good practices of collaborative action to facilitate response. These practices included unprompted reporting to the INFOSAN Secretariat, timely exchange of information among members who were involved, and good utilization of the functions of the INFOSAN Community Website. Both examples were also demonstrative of the value, importance and effectiveness of INFOSAN in the region.

Participants were then reminded that enhancing INFOSAN in Asia will:

(1) Strengthen the network through unprompted and timely reporting of food safety events of international concern in Asia and increased sharing of information relating to managing such events.

(2) Facilitate the identification of food safety events of international concern through a food safety information exchange in Asia.

(3) Facilitate national food control system development in Asia through the sharing of information, experiences and best practices among Member States.

(4) Improve the capacity of members to better fulfil their roles and responsibilities in the network.
Finally, the Strategy for Enhancing INFOSAN in Asia was presented to outline regionally-based, coordinated and collaborative actions which should be undertaken. These actions are categorized into four themes including:

1. INFOSAN Community Development
2. Capacity-Building and Education
3. Effective Response to Food Safety Emergencies
4. Support to Enhance the Global INFOSAN Network

2.2.2 INFOSAN and National Actions

2.2.2.1 Republic of Korea

Dr Il-Ung Oh, Senior Scientific Officer, Ministry of Food and Drug Safety, Republic of Korea presented about the risk information system in Korea. The presentation started with an outline of the organizational structure of the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety. Next, the information collection route was described as including information sources from the National Food Safety Information Service (NFSI), language experts for drug safety information, INFOSAN, overseas information monitoring reporters, dispatched Ministry for Food and Drug Safety (MFDS) officers, and overseas embassies. Several databases are used for information analysis including:

- Domestic food manufacturing and imported food (administrative portal system)
- Food raw materials and food additives
- Risk assessment and information on toxicological data

For risk information sharing, there is real-time information sharing with relevant divisions in MFDS, and an information sharing network with relevant government agencies has been established. Korea is committed to support the strengthening of INFOSAN in Asia. The country has hosted the first two regional INFOSAN meetings (2011 and 2012). Korea also initiated discussions on the INFOSAN Community Website regarding food safety issues and adulterated foods.

2.2.2.2 Myanmar

Dr Ohnmar Soe Win, Assistant Director, Ministry of Health, Myanmar presented a brief history of the development of the Department of Food and Drug Administration and described its scope of responsibilities. This was followed by an outline of the objectives of the national food law which include: 1) to enable the public to consume food of good quality, hygienic, and of low risk; 2) to prevent the public from consuming food that may cause harm to health; and 3) to control and regulate the production, importation, exportation, storage, distribution and sale of food.

An overview of food control functions were described in line with the national food law, regulations, orders and directives. In accordance with national food law, all imported foods need a product recommendation from the food administrative authority of the respective export country prior to import into Myanmar. Based on such recommendations, the Department of Food and Drug Administration (DFDA) issues import and export recommendations which are
forwarded to the Department of Trade for issuing of import and export licences. A consignment arriving in Myanmar is only allowed for distribution after it has been being assessed and issued with a health certificate by DFDA. DFDA also issues local food manufacturing recommendations for local food manufacturers.

All of the agencies involved in INFOSAN and their respective roles and responsibilities were described. It was recognized that multi-agency collaboration is required to develop a Food Safety Emergency Response (FSER) plan. A FSER plan must build on an effective food control system. In order to strengthen national food control in Myanmar, the following actions were recommended:

- Strengthen human resources capacity, legislation, an timely communication
- Implement an appropriate communication system to all relevant national stakeholders
- Upgrade the laboratory capacity and facilities for testing;
- Recruit additional human resources to review food related incidents; conduct inspections and foodborne disease surveillance.
- Establish mechanism for sharing information
- Establish traceability, recall and withdrawal systems according to legislation.

2.2.3 Plenary 2 discussion points

During the following discussion, issues concerning INFOSAN related tools and capacity building initiatives were discussed. The INFOSAN Secretariat informed that the available FAO/WHO guidance documents in the series of food safety emergency (Developing Food Safety Emergency Response Plans; Applying principles of risk analysis during food safety emergencies; and Improving food recall systems) provide a good basis for taking action at the national level. The INFOSAN Secretariat also indicated that training material should continuously be improved in order to strengthening knowledge and understanding of roles and responsibilities of INFOSAN members. Suggestions and feedback are welcomed and encouraged. In addition to the INFOSAN related guidance material, FAO and WHO also provides capacity building support through their broader food safety food safety programmes.

The issue of information sensitivity and how best to handle sensitive information, was also discussed. The INFOSAN Secretariat explained that in terms of managing information for members, information shared should be information for action. Often the Secretariat will only share information with the few countries that may be involved in the event (receiving, producing or selling affected products). Posting a global INFOSAN Alert is much less frequent so when sensitivities exist, messages are targeted. Alerts are written and coordinated with INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point before posting. The INFOSAN Secretariat only disseminates information when a food safety event is of international concern. In some cases, this may be the reason why information sometimes can be found on national food authorities’ website before it becomes INFOSAN alerts are sent out.

The INFOSAN Secretariat also reminded members that their responsibilities include reporting of actions taken in response to INFOSAN alerts. This information can be shared via the INFOSAN Community Website and can often be useful to stimulate action by other members.
The National Food Safety Information system in Korean was also discussed. A Korean delegate explained that the NFSI monitoring is taking place in 26 countries around the world including US, China, Japan, Germany and Thailand. Information is gathered by as part of the country’s overseas information monitoring efforts and based on different criteria and reliability from different sources. This may include the media, Korean residents, university students, dispatched workers residing in the concerned countries.

2.2.4 Group work 1: INFOSAN in Asia

The objective of Group work 1 was for participants to discuss actions that have been taken, actions that need to be taken and how to put ideas into action with regards to the Strategy on Enhancing INFOSAN in Asia. The Group work also aimed to improve the understanding of roles and responsibilities of INFOSAN members through review of certain components of the INFOSAN Member’s guide which were identified in the Strategy as requiring clarification.

The expected outputs included a better understanding among participants about their roles and responsibilities as INFOSAN members; summary of advice and action items for follow-up as they pertain to activities under the Strategy for Enhancing INFOSAN in Asia. The outputs were meant to help the INFOSAN Secretariat to prioritize specific actions for follow-up in coordination with the regional offices.

During this session, participants were divided into four groups. Each group discussed issues classified under the four themes of the Strategy for Enhancing INFOSAN in Asia. These were: 1) INFOSAN Community Development; 2) Capacity-Building and Education; 3) Responding Effectively to Food Safety Emergencies; and 4) Support to Enhance the Global INFOSAN Network.
2.2.5 Outcome of Group work 1

Peter Karim Ben Embarek, Scientist, Department of Food Safety and Zoonoses, WHO Headquarters presented the outcome of Group Work 1. For Theme 1 “INFOSAN Community Development” of the Strategy on Enhancing INFOSAN in Asia two main messages came out of the group discussions. The first message was to ensure full range of members identified/engaged. The actions proposed for the INFOSAN Secretariat included to continue to facilitate regional meetings to raise awareness and considering inviting IHR National Focal Points and to contact the IHR National Focal Points and remind them about who their national INFOSAN counterparts are. Actions for member states included to seek high level engagement of different ministries; hold regular national meetings to facilitate understanding and collaboration; develop national INFOSAN networks; establish e-mail group between national INFOSAN Members; and keep the INFOSAN Secretariat updated of national set-ups. The second main message for INFOSAN Community Development was for Members to be empowered to communicate directly with one another. The actions proposed for the INFOSAN Secretariat included ensuring the contact details of Members are kept up-to-date by implementing automated reminder emails that would prompt verification that contact is still active; and exploring options for introducing different levels of access on the Community Website to allow other members (i.e. industry, consumer organizations, etc) to join and contribute in different ways. For INFOSAN Members proposed actions included to request "acknowledgement of receipt" when communicating directly with members and to participate in demos of the INFOSAN Community Website.

For Theme 2 “Capacity-Building and Education” of the Strategy for Enhancing INFOSAN in Asia, two main messages were produced. For main message A “Better understanding INFOSAN” six actions were proposed for the INFOSAN Secretariat. These included:

(1) to introduce a mandatory tutorial at the time of registration;
(2) to pilot test the reporting template with some countries;
(3) to refine the “What to report” as categories; to include a version of the confidentiality clause at the bottom of the correspondence and alerts;
(4) to look into harmonizing nomenclature between IHR and INFOSAN Nomenclature (NFP vs ECP); and
(5) to revise/simplify the way the Members Guide is written.

For Member States the proposed actions included to participate in review process of the reporting template and to look at the tutorial once it is developed. Main message B from the Group discussion was to understand the link to IHR Core capacities for food safety. Actions proposed for the INFOSAN Secretariat included to send a reminder to members informing them of approaching deadline and encourage contact to provide input. For Members the proposed action was to engage with IHR National Focal Points to give input to the survey next year.

The main messages for Theme 3 “Effective Response to Food Safety Emergencies” of the Strategy for enhancing INFOSAN in Asia were 1) sharing information on outbreaks and recalls and 2) strengthening INFOSAN processes at national level. For main message A the proposed actions for INFOSAN Secretariat were to figure out how to technically integrate information (on recalls and outbreaks) from government websites into the community website; and to consider providing examples of best practices of data presentation. For Members, the proposed action was to help the INFOSAN Secretariat identify how sources can be integrated into the Community Website. For main message B, the proposed action for INFOSAN Secretariat was to encourage
Members to use generic email accounts. The proposed actions for Members were for some countries to provide examples of why generic email works well in their countries; to translate incoming information into local languages and disseminate; and to develop SOPs (broader) for food safety and response which includes how INFOSAN emergency contact points operates.

The main message for Theme 4 “Support to Enhance the Global INFOSAN Network” was actions can be undertaken in Asia and serve as a model for the rest of the network. Proposed action for INFOSAN Secretariat is to facilitate annual reporting of INFOSAN-involvement in the region. For Members, the proposed actions were to complete the annual national INFOSAN report when requested and to include template/guidance on how to showcase INFOSAN at national level.

2.3 Plenary 3: National food control systems: regional update

2.3.1 FAO’s work for Asia and the Pacific

Ms Shashi Sareen, Senior food and Nutrition Officer, FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (RAP) presented FAO’s activities in the Asia Pacific Region. Ms Sareen started by presenting the vision of FAO namely achieving food security for all which is at the heart of FAO's efforts – to make sure people have regular access to enough high-quality food to lead active and healthy lives. Food security was defined as all people, at all times, having physical, social and economic access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy. It was observed that food safety is an important component of food safety and FAO RAP places great importance on strengthening the same.

Four basic approaches that are currently being followed were highlighted namely implementation of a food chain approach based on the premise that hazards may arise at different stages of the food supply and need to be either prevented from entering the chain or controlled to reduce them to acceptable levels; following a preventative risk-based approach where the focus is on building safety across the food chain rather than a reactive one based on sampling and testing of end products; implementing sound national food control and regulatory
systems which would cover the standards and their implementation; and acknowledging that all actors in the food chain namely farmers or producers, processors, handlers, government and consumers amongst others have specific roles and responsibilities in ensuring food safety.

This was followed by elaborating the food safety and quality programme of FAO in the region comprising seven broad areas of activities as follows:

- Food safety policies, legislation, governance (including coordination mechanisms)
- Sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) standards and norms (Codex related activities)
- Enforcement and surveillance (inspection, testing, certification, food-borne disease surveillance systems)
- Food safety in various agro-food supply chains (commodity issues)
- Food safety emergency management and recall systems
- Certifications and accreditation
- Trainings, awareness and education

The focus areas and activities under each of the above areas were highlighted.

Recent regional consultations and workshops on some current important subjects were also highlighted and their recommendations presented. Of special interest were those relating to Regional Consultation on Food Safety Policy development in Asia; Regional Consultation on ‘Equivalence/MRAs to Facilitate Trade of Safe and Quality Foods for the SAARC region’ and the ‘Regional Workshop for Asian Countries on hygiene and safety in food retail’ held in September 2013.

The ongoing regional and country projects supported through FAO were also highlighted specifically ‘Support to Capacity Building and Implementation of International Food Safety Standards in ASEAN Countries’, ‘Improving food safety in Bangladesh’, ‘Developing food law in Laos’, ‘Strengthening of Food Safety and Standards in Bhutan’, ‘Strengthening of National Codex Capacity in Mongolia’, ‘Strengthening Vietnamese SPS capacity for trade’, and a project on Institutional Strengthening of Food Safety and quality control in Supply Chain Management of Livestock Products and INFOSAN in Thailand (currently under consideration).

Some future priorities for the region which FAO would be working on in the next biennium included strengthening food safety coordination mechanism between Ministries and Agencies in countries; developing food safety indicators for the region; developing food safety strategy for the region; risk analysis detailed trainings to cover activities such as risk profiling, exposure assessment, risk communication; strengthening food import control systems, food recall and traceability; strengthening food standards setting in countries addressing the role of regulatory and voluntary standards; regional network for safety in food retail; regional guidance documents on safety in food retail; strengthening Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) schemes and certification systems.

2.3.2 Strengthening food safety in the South-East Asia

Dr Kunal Bagchi, Regional Adviser, Nutrition and Food Safety, WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia presented on WHO’s food safety work in the South-East Asia region. Dr Bagchi
explained that several food safety challenges are encountered in the region. These include effective food safety programme management and adequate infrastructure for delivery of interventions in several Member States; individual sections of the national food safety programmes often function independently without appropriate coordination and collaboration with each other. Analytical capability in aspects of food safety varies across the region; inadequate foodborne diseases surveillance system; weak food safety aspect of domestic consumption; limited awareness about food safety among the consumer groups.

Some of the important activities undertaken over the past few years include a regional Conference on Food Safety for Asia and Pacific (2004); discussion of Food Safety and Nutrition issues at the 59th (2006) and 60th (2007) Sessions of the Regional Committee and the need for development of integrated national nutrition and food safety policy and plan of action; assessments in 2008 and 2009 of the food safety programmes in the Region that highlighted the need for more commitment towards the implementation of the regional strategy and development of integrated national food safety plans of action among other issues.

The ‘regional food safety strategy 2013-2017’ was formulated in 2013 with the goal of encouraging Member States to initiate, develop and sustain multisectoral approaches and measures for the promotion of food safety. The strategy has four strategic elements: 1) Developing country-oriented, integrated and multisectoral food safety policies and plans of action; 2) Addressing appropriate food control systems that encompass the entire food chain, with focus on consumers and in alignment with international systems; 3) Addressing effective control and prevention mechanisms for foodborne diseases and establishing effective surveillance systems; 4) Strengthening partnerships and networking for increased participation and contribution at standards-setting meetings of stakeholders at the national, regional and global levels.

Several activities have been undertaken during the period 2012 and 2013, in tandem with the formulation of the regional food safety strategy: a regional meeting of national nutrition and food safety programme managers was organized with the intention of aligning nutrition and food safety activities in the Member States. This was followed by a bi-regional meeting on chemical risk analysis in the food chain; and a regional workshop on capacity building of National Codex Committees in South-East Asia. Discussions were held with the Ministry of Health, Timor-Leste, for its membership of the Codex Alimentarius. All Member States have introduced food safety activities. For example, Bhutan has established a Food Act in 2005 and Food Rules & Regulations 2007; received ISO 22000 certification of four major food establishments; provided HACCP certification of two major food establishments; and trained a range of food safety staff. Bangladesh, Maldives and Nepal, as other examples of SEARO Member States, have also introduced several activities to promote food safety.

Some key regional-level food safety activities planned for the next biennium include dissemination of the regional food safety strategy and its alignment with national food safety activities; closer alignment with disease surveillance and IHR; effective control and preventive mechanisms for foodborne diseases; harmonization of food laws, regulations and standards with Codex and regional associations; support to the national Codex Committees; and promoting safe street foods including food available at school cafeteria and through the school-meal programmes.

2.3.3 Strengthening food safety in the Western Pacific Region

Dr Li Ailan, Director, Health Security and Emergencies, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific Region provided an update on the progress of implementation of the Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011-2015. She recognized that good progress has been
made so far, but that the region is still in the early stage of ensuring effective food safety systems in all Member States.

She informed that the IHR core capacities monitoring tool as well as the Regional Director’s progress report and country missions and regional meetings are being used to monitor progress in the region. Progress was recorded in all the key areas covered in the Western Pacific Regional Food Safety Strategy 2011-2015, but with some variation between countries. Pacific island countries generally score lower in the IHR core capacity score compared with countries in Asia. Countries score highest in terms of having risk-based food inspection systems as well as mechanisms to trace, recall and dispose contaminated food products in place. The lowest score is in surveillance, assessment and management of priority food safety event as well as availability of epidemiological data on food contamination.

In terms of developing risk-based regulatory frameworks good progress has been made on national food laws, regulations and policies. Some countries have developed new food laws and some (primarily in the Pacific) have integrated food quality and nutrition aspects into food regulatory framework. Event-based surveillance has been expanded, but improving food safety data is still an area that requires more collaborative efforts in the future. Guidance documents for risk-based food inspection are being developed and drafting of curriculums for food inspectors and in-country training of food inspectors is on-going. Several food safety training and education activities have taken place including overseas attachments and in-country training. The Mekong Rainbow Project has successfully combined training on food safety, nutrition and health promotion and established school canteens and gardens for better nutrition and health education. Progress has also taken place in the area of food safety emergency preparedness and response. Some countries have developed specific food safety emergency response plans while others have integrated food safety emergency planning into broader public health emergency plans.

Fostering regional partnerships is important for strengthening coordination and cooperation between stakeholders along the food chain. WHO WPRO has strengthened its cooperation with partners including INFOSAN, Codex, International Trade Centre (ITC) and the Food Safety Cooperation Working Group (FSCWG) consisting of key partners working in the area of food safety. INFOSAN in Asia is a good example of regional contribution to the global network development and for improving members’ capacity to actively participate in INFOSAN and for strengthening cross-programme linkages.

Significant challenges including funding constraints remain and need to be addressed, possibly requiring innovative ways of working through stronger partnerships. Advocacy for investment in food safety at country level is important for enhancing food safety in Asia. Meeting the IHR core capacity requirements is a key challenge for many countries and there is a need for strengthening cross-programme linkages and cooperation.

2.3.4 Plenary discussion

During the Plenary Discussion session the issue of voluntary standards was discussed. It was explained that voluntary standards can be government as well as private standards. E.g. GAP standards are often voluntary standards that are adopted at national level.

Representatives from Lao PDR and Cambodia expressed their appreciation to WHO for the support they have received for development of food legislation. However, for Cambodia the process of development has stopped due to funding constraints and a request for further support was pledged.
Experiences from the WHO implemented Mekong Rainbow Project were also shared and other countries were interested in implementing similar projects. However, it was explained that the project is still ongoing and it is too early to conclude on experiences.

2.4 Plenary 4: National food control systems: country actions and experiences

2.4.1 Bhutan

Ms Dechen Choki, Regulatory and Quarantine Officer, Bhutan Agriculture & Food Regulatory Authority (BAFRA) delivered a presentation on food control systems in Bhutan. The presentation outlined the institutional setup for food control in Bhutan and the role of the National Food Quality and Safety Commission (NFQSC) which consists of representatives from all key ministries and agencies involved in food safety. For food imports, permissions must be obtained from BAFRA prior to importation. However, in the case of imports from India, BAFRA has an agreement with Export Inspection Council of India (EIC) about mutual recognition of certification. BAFRA also serves as a national INFOSAN Focal Point while the INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point is located within the Department of Public Health under Ministry of Health.

Development of food standards and guidelines in Bhutan follows the ones of Codex Alimentarius. Examples of guidelines that have recently been developed include a food handlers’ training manual; minimum standards for meat retailing and transport; general requirements for the establishment and design of food establishments and food stalls; and minimum standard requirements for street food. Food handlers’ training was highlighted as one of the key success stories for improving food safety in Bhutan.

Major obstacles and challenges for food safety include lack of scientific data and limited resources allocated to food safety. Risk analysis capacity is also considered to be low and data for foodborne diseases is limited. The country also experience shortage of qualified manpower and a robust food safety emergency response plan.

Priority activities and needs include enhancing capacity for risk analysis and addressing food safety and food control in a comprehensive and coordinated manner. Development of standard operating procedures and establishment of a food safety emergency response plan and food import control mechanism were also mentioned as priority areas.

2.4.2 China

A representative from China presented about the national food control system in China. The presentation explained about the institutional setup for food control in China as well as the interrelationship and roles and responsibilities of Ministry of Agriculture; China Food and Drug Administration (CFDA); Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine (AQSIQ); and National Health and Family Planning Commission (NHFPC).

Food Safety Law launched in 2009 is being revised. Food safety emergency preparedness and response will be adjusted according to the new Food Safety Law and the Reform of State Council Bodies and the Transformation of Their Function.

The announcement of the Food Safety Law in China has clarified and updated the legal framework for food safety. The Twelfth Five-year Plan Supervision System of State Food Safety launched in 2012 has clarified the following contents: supervision of food safety; a national food safety standard system; food safety risk surveillance; food safety risk assessment and communication; food safety training and education; and food safety information sharing.
However, a number of challenges to strengthening food safety in China still remain. This include efficient supervision; basic food safety research, surveillance and evaluation; limited capacity to undertake epidemiological investigations; weak risk communication structures; and timely communication of INFOSAN information. To address some of these challenges China has prioritized to strengthen its international cooperation in the development of food standards, strengthening foodborne disease surveillance and training on risk communication as well epidemiological investigation ability and enhanced participation in INFOSAN.

2.4.3 Lao People's Democratic Republic

A representative from Lao PDR informed about national food control in Lao PDR. The overall goal of food control is to reduce morbidity and mortality due to foodborne illness and to promote safe food production and international and domestic trade in safe food. The presentation explained about the food safety control structure in the country as well as the roles and responsibilities of the different agencies involved. Ministry of Health is the food safety regulatory authority in Lao PDR while the Bureau of Food and Drug Inspection is another key agency responsible for inspection at the points of entry.

In 2013, Lao PDR enacted a new Food Law which is in line with ASEAN and WTO requirements and which covers the entire food chain. Implementation of the new Food Law is now being planned and necessary resources are being mobilized. The Food Law is supported by a number of regulations that specify more detailed legal requirements. Lao PDR has four laboratories supporting food safety testing each specialised in different technical areas.

The Bureau Food and Drug Inspection (BFDI) is responsible for food inspection and monitoring. This includes inspection of domestically produced food as well as imported food products. In terms of food safety information, Lao PDR has established a web-based system that connects the provinces with the central level. With regard to international food safety alerts, Lao PDR relies on INFOSAN and the ASEAN Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (ARASFF) to protect public health.

The recently completed Mekong Rainbow Project has contributed to improving food safety awareness among farmers, food producers and consumers. The project has provided training as well as improved physical structures for food preparation and production.

In 2008 developed a food safety emergency response plan based on the FAO/WHO guidance. The plan was further revised in 2013 to ensure consistency with IHR and the SPS Agreement. The Plan is managed by a multiagency coordination group composing of all concerned ministries involved in food safety.

The national food control system in Lao PDR experiences a number of challenges. This includes unclear definition of roles and responsibilities and communication mechanisms; limited food analysis capacity; limited capacity to comply with food safety requirements on export markets; limited awareness of food safety among food producers, vendors and preparers; limited number of enforcement officers; and limited laboratory capacity. Priority actions to address these challenges include enforcement of the new food safety Law; revision of existing food regulations; capacity building among food inspectors; improved food testing capacity and better alienation of roles and responsibilities.
2.4.4 Nepal

Ms Jiwan Prava Lama, Director General, Department of Food Technology and Quality Control (DFTQC) presented about the food safety and quality control systems in Nepal. Food control in Nepal involves various ministries and departments that together cover the five components of the national food control system (legislation; laboratories, surveillance and monitoring; information, education and communication; inspection and food control management). The legal framework for food quality and safety consists of various Acts and Rules as well as 111 mandatory commodity standards and standards for food additives, contaminants and labelling.

Since 2008, the number of inspections of food businesses and food service outlets has increased. The number of food analyses has similarly increased to over 25,000 analyses in 2012. Cases of food adulteration have decreased slightly while the number of case filing has increased to app 250 in 2012.

DFTQC has a strong focus on inspection and monitoring of street food and highway hotels and restaurants. The work is supported by the European Union (EU) who has provided a mobile food inspection laboratory. The purpose of the focus on street food and highway restaurants is to improve food safety in this market segment which has shown to be a main source of food contamination. Based on inspection findings, DFTQC provide coloured stickers to the food establishments indicating the food safety conditions in each establishment. The stickers also help improve consumer awareness of food safety.

The main challenges associated with food safety in Nepal include harmonization of food standards and legislation; laboratory capacity; compliance capacity to food safety requirements on export markets; outdated food legislation; increasing consumer concerns; and weak linkages between stakeholders along the food chain continuum. The future perspectives for food safety in Nepal encompasses development of a food safety policy; updating food laws, regulations and standards; strengthen food analysis and human resources capacity; and scale-up enforcement action.

2.4.5 Republic of Korea

Dr Il-Ung Oh, Senior Scientific Officer of Risk Information Division, Ministry of Food and Drug Safety presented about the integrated food safety network in the Republic of Korea. The Ministry of Food and Drug Safety (MFDS) was established in 2013. With the launch of MFDS, food safety management which used to be conducted by many different government agencies has been streamlined and integrated. MFDS is now responsible for food safety management throughout the food chain. MFDS previously consisted of one headquarter, five bureaus, 52 divisions, and one team. This has now been changed to one headquarter; seven bureaus; one planning office, and 43 divisions. The number of regional offices and laboratories increased to six and 13, respectively. In terms of human resources, the total number of employees has increased to 1,760. In Korea, food safety information is currently collected and managed by different agencies and scattered in various formats and locations. It was recognized that this setup affects timely action and increases the risk of duplication of work.

There is a need for establishing an integrated information management system in Korea linking national food safety authorities closer together. As part of an effort to establish the integrated system, MFDS is carrying out the project ‘The National Integrated Food Safety Information Network’. In collaboration with other government organizations dealing with food safety, MFDS plans to integrate information databases to share food safety information in real time and to set up a portal system to effectively provide consumers with useful information.
The integrated food safety information network will create various benefits. First and foremost, the government can more effectively implement food policies. This will contribute to improved food safety management without barriers among agencies. Secondly, a more systematic food policy will be put in place by sharing food safety information related to the whole food chain from production to consumption. Thirdly, the system will help consumers to select safe food. Consumers can select safe food by checking food safety risk forecasts through news media, smartphones and internet. The system is also expected to support food industries to strengthen their competitiveness. Through tailored services provided by the government, food industries will be able to effectively manage and analyze relevant food safety information and take pre-emptive responses. Furthermore, the system will help food industries to create new values. It will contribute to creating new jobs such as information analysts, food safety consultants, and food marketing experts. Last but not least, the system will create a new field of industry through the merging of food, Information and Communications Technology (ICT), and electronics.

Based on the integrated food safety information network, MFDS is also planning to set up ‘Food Safety Risk Rapid Alert System’ and Food Safety Risk Forecast System by 2015.

2.4.6 Bangladesh

Dr Md Abdur Razzaque Miah, Deputy Director & Chief Analyst, National Food Safety Laboratory, Bangladesh presented about the national food control system and INFOSAN in Bangladesh. Dr Miah highlighted the fact that food adulteration and diarrhoeal diseases are a main health issue in Bangladesh. The food control system in Bangladesh consists of various ministries and agencies with limited coordination between them. Food inspection and enforcement is not based on risk, but follows a more ad-hoc approach based on mostly outdated food Acts and Rules. A new Pure Food Ordinance was introduced in 2013 which is the beginning of a revitalization process of the legal framework for food quality and safety in the country.

The Institute of Public Health serves as the national INFOSAN Emergency Contact point for Bangladesh. In terms of national information sharing and communication, Bangladesh Food Safety Network (BFSN) plays an important role. The network was launched in 2011 and needs strengthening in order to become fully functional and effective.

Some of the priorities for strengthening food safety in Bangladesh include development of a science-based National Food Safety and Quality Policy; strengthening inter-ministerial coordination and national technical capacity; better implementation of preventive measures across the food chain; and strengthened consumer awareness and education. Progress is happening in a number of areas, but much still needs to be done.

2.4.7 Plenary discussion

The Plenary Discussion emphasized on grading of food service establishments as a way of improving consumer awareness about food safety and encouraging food businesses to improve food safety management. It was highlighted that restaurant grading systems can be led by the public as well as private sector and that the design of the system should take local conditions and country contexts into consideration.
Malaysia informed about its restaurant grading system which is implemented by the Ministry of Urban Wellbeing, Housing and Local Government and highlighted that the system is important for strategizing interventions. Singapore mentioned that the country has had a restaurant grading system in place for several years. However, recent data has shown that there is no correlation between the grading of restaurants and outbreaks of foodborne diseases. Outbreaks of foodborne diseases are not necessarily linked to restaurants with low grading. Other countries that have restaurant grading in place include Maldives and Nepal.

2.5  Plenary 5: Working towards an effective national food control system

2.5.1  Current guidance on an effective food control system

Professor Alan Reilly, Chief Executive, Food Safety Authority of Ireland presented about current guidance on an effective food control system. He highlighted that an effective national food control system is essential to protect public health, prevent fraud, avoid food adulteration, and facilitate trade in safe food. To be effective, a national food control system requires coordinated management throughout the food chain continuum. Regulatory control of food safety is usually a responsibility shared between national, regional and local government authorities and commitment to cooperation between all of these is essential. Food legislation should include unambiguous provisions that describe how these different national bodies and agencies cooperate and collaborate to ensure the consistent implementation of food safety controls. Additionally the functions and enforcement powers of national agencies involved in food control needs to be clearly defined in legislation.

For a national food control system to be effective, it requires a system of governance which is based on a framework of food law; regulations and standards that give effect to the food law; a food inspection and enforcement programme that is risk-based; a coordinated monitoring and surveillance programme that is supported by accredited laboratories; a food incident management and emergency response plans; a well trained workforce of food inspectors and a strategy for risk communication. Effective communication of risks associated with unsafe food should include the use of social media channels for rapid dissemination of factual information.

Effective and consistent enforcement of food regulations are key components of an effective national food control strategy. Food inspection needs to be risk-based which means that regulatory agencies should focus food control activities in areas where risks to public health are highest. It also allows resources to be targeted more efficiently and effectively. In this regard, food monitoring and surveillance programmes are important to highlight risks and provide reliable data for informing food safety policy and targeting risk-based food inspection.

2.5.2  Coordinated national capacity assessment and planning: Experience in Cambodia

Dr Ly Sovann, Deputy Director, Ministry of Health Cambodia presented about coordinated national capacity assessment and planning in Cambodia. Dr Ly outlined the different components of the Cambodian national workplan for implementation of IHR minimum core capacities and APSED priority areas and informed that the next review of the APSED/IHR core capacities will take place in January 2014.
In order to strengthen the capacity of the national food control system, Cambodia conducted a capacity assessment and planning exercise. The exercise looked at four different areas of the food control system and competencies were scored in accordance with a needs assessment tool. The four focus areas were intersectoral collaboration, laws and regulations; food monitoring and inspection services; foodborne disease surveillance and emergency response; and risk communication. Based on the capacity assessment, priority gaps were identified and actions to address these gaps were proposed. Where possible, timeframes, indicators and responsible agencies were also identified. The draft action plan is being discussed with each concerned ministry and will later be forwarded to possible donors for funding support.

The capacity assessment tool has shown to be very useful for facilitating discussion among concerned ministries involved in food safety. The tool has encouraged sectors to work together and develop coordinated workplans. However, a key to success includes strong leadership and ownership of the process; commitment and trust; as well as clear indicators to measure progress.

2.5.3 Plenary discussion

A question was raised about the timeframe for establishing an “ideal” food safety system. It was clarified that the timeframe varies between countries depending on the country context; the state of the current food safety system; the urgency to address certain issues; and the economic and political consequences of food safety incidents.

A question about information sharing between food safety partners and the public at national level was also raised. While sharing of information with the public is important, it was highlighted that the source of information should be reliable. In this regard it was recommended that the agency responsible for food safety is in charge of all risk communication.

A participant asked about coordination of enforcement action between partners in Ireland. Prof Reilly informed that the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) is delegated to enforce all food legislation in the country. The enforcement is taking place through service contracts with various agencies including central and 33 local agencies. The service contracts cover the legal delegation given to the agency on behalf of FSAI and the resources that the agency will allocate during the work. The contracts also specify the reporting system which defines the type of reports, numbers of analysis and frequency of reporting to be conducted and how the agency is going to monitor the work. The last part of the service contracts is openness and transparency specifying that all reports are posted on the FSAI website in order to maintain transparency.
2.5.4 Group work 2: Towards an effective national food control system

Participants were divided into four groups and requested to identify challenges and constraints as well as success factors and lessons learned from strengthening different components of national food control systems. The following food control systems components were discussed:

- Group A: Governance, coordination and regulatory frameworks;
- Group B: Risk-based food inspection and enforcement;
- Group C: Food safety emergency preparedness and response;
- Group D: Food safety awareness, training and education

The purpose of the group work was to consider key factors for success based on best practices and lessons learned; identify challenges and constraints for strengthening national food control systems in Asia; and discuss options for interventions to overcome challenges and support national food control systems strengthening. The composition of groups was based on participants’ own choice and interest in the different themes discussed.

2.6 Plenary 6: Feedback from group work

2.6.1 Group A – Governance, coordination and regulatory frameworks

Group A stressed the importance of food standards setting and enforcement being conducted independently in order to reduce conflicts of interest. The Group also highlighted the establishment of formal inter-ministerial committees with representatives from multiple ministries as key for success in food control management and coordination. Regulatory enforcement requires ownership by the enforcement agency and the division of roles and responsibilities is crucial for effective national food control activities. Some countries had
experiences in establishing single agencies responsible for food control and it was highlighted that single agency systems might have a better sense about feasibility of compliance and enforcement than multi-agency systems.

A number of challenges in strengthening national food control systems were identified and actions to address these challenges were proposed. Key challenges identified included time required for development, review and endorsement of food legislation as well as the technical capacity of enforcement officer to ensure effective implementation. Limited laboratory capacity to support enforcement; lack of and conflicting laws and regulations; and non-functioning inter-ministerial committees were other challenges identified by the group.

In order to overcome challenges and constraints action should include ensuring high-level engagement (e.g. Ministers) to chair inter-ministerial food control committees; consolidating laboratory resources and expertise; providing continuous training (online, face-to-face etc.) for enforcement officers; and advocating for development and endorsement of new food legislation among policy makers and parliament members.

During the following discussion it was highlighted that separation of food standards development and enforcement may not be possible in all countries. The One Health approach was mentioned as an additional key factor for success in terms of strengthening food control coordination and collaboration and high-level advocacy is needed to bring food safety onto the political agenda.

2.6.2 Group B – Risk-based food inspection and enforcement

Group B identified a series of best practices and key factors for success with regards to risk-based food inspection and enforcement. These included high-level commitment by relevant agencies involved in food inspection and enforcement as well as coordination among agencies to strengthen food safety throughout the food chain. A robust food safety surveillance programme and data collection to inform food inspection priorities is equally important and comprehensive food legislation, manpower, equipment and facilities constitute main key factors for success.

In terms of challenges and constraints, the lack of recognition of food safety by high-level policy makers and resource limitations for inspection, surveillance and laboratory testing were prioritized. Action to address these challenges may include making better use of media to bring food safety to the attention of high-level officials and generating data on the impact of foodborne diseases on health, economics and trade. Food safety policies may also support securing resources for inspection and enforcement.

During the following discussion it was stressed that the risk-based approach to food inspection and enforcement should be embedded in national legislation in order to facilitate implementation. It was also highlighted that food business registries and risk profiling of food manufacturers are prerequisites for planning and implementing risk-based food inspection and enforcement activities.
2.6.3 Group C – Food safety emergency preparedness and response

Group C identified a number of key factors for success in terms of preparedness; response and evaluation of food safety emergencies. In terms of preparedness, effective surveillance systems, laboratory capacity and food legislation should be in place and clear delineation of roles and responsibilities should be spelled out in national food safety emergency plans. High-level committees with multi-agency participation; functional communication channels; active participation in INFOSAN; and regular testing of the plan are other key factors for success in food safety emergency response planning.

In terms of responding to a food safety emergency outbreak provision of clear information about contaminated products by the country of origin; prompt notification to concerned agencies; availability of local expertise; emergency risk communications; robust national response system and adequate laboratory capacity were identified as key factors for success.

Key factors for success identified for post food safety incidents included documentation of incident and compilation of reports; sharing of corrective actions with policy makers; identification of gaps and areas for improvement.

The group identified a number of challenges and constraints to improve food safety emergency preparedness and response including domestic capacity; communication; and coordination. In terms of priority action, the group recommended delineation of roles and responsibilities between concerned stakeholders as well as strengthening legislation and response capacity within concerned agencies.

During the following discussion it was highlighted that the basis for food safety emergency response plans is solid national food safety incident response systems. Emergency response plans can be added to these systems and activated if needed. It was also stressed that food safety emergency response plans should be seen as an important component of broader health emergency plans and that testing of these plans is very important in order to identify gaps and needs for capacity building. Countries may also want to consider mapping out regional and international resources available that can be mobilized and utilized, if needed.

2.6.4 Group D – Food safety awareness, training and education

Group D identified lessons learned and key factors for success with regards to food safety awareness, training and education. Promotion of the WHO 5-keys to safer food and integration of basic food hygiene into school curriculums together with television programming and general advertisement were identified as best practices. The key factors for success were clear messages developed for specific target audiences and repeated communication.

Some of the challenges and constraints identified by the group included people’s trust in information sources; language barriers; and high staff turnover. Low levels of literacy and awareness about food safety; outdated food safety training material; lack of systematic evaluation of trainings; conflicting messages; government will; and sustainability aspects of training, education and awareness were other challenges and constraints identified.

In terms of prioritizing action to address these challenges, the group recommended to develop up-to-date training material; repeat training and education based on detailed capacity building needs assessments; consider options for providing e-learning courses; undertake social audits and develop criteria for impact evaluation.
2.6.5 Plenary discussion

During the plenary discussion the issue of funding of food control activities was brought up. It was clarified that there are several ways to fund food control activities such as fees for inspection of food businesses; food industry taxes; and export levies. Mobilization of resources and sufficient funding is a government responsibility and countries may want to consider a combination of different funding options. A way of making better use of limited resources may be to strengthen linkages with related programmes as well as to establish stronger linkages between facilities such as laboratories in other countries and international and regional networks.

2.7 Plenary 7: Opportunity for cross-programme collaboration

2.7.1 Healthy markets for safer food

Dr Ng Lee Ching, Associate Professor and Director, National Environment Agency (NEA), Singapore presented a case study on healthy markets for safer food in Singapore. Food safety in Singapore takes a multi-agency approach with the Agri-food and Veterinary Authority (AVA); NEA; and Ministry of Health (MOH) being the lead agencies. One Health serves as the coordinating committee and working committee between the three agencies.

Street food in Singapore has a long history. In the late 1960s, the Singapore government conducted an island-wide registration of all street hawkers and licences were issued. In the 1970s and early 1980s, the government embarked on a programme to construct food hawker centres and resettle about 18,000 street hawkers into these centres. This initiative fostered close collaboration between various government departments.

In 2000, the government initiated a Hawker Centres Upgrading Programme (HUP) and by 2017, the government propose to build 10 new hawker centres. The establishment of hawker centres has significantly improved food hygiene among street food vendors and expanded the market for street food. Some of the improvements made included a phasing out of poultry slaughtering in food markets since 1992; implementation of cold chain system and a legal requirement for all fresh meat to be sold in chilled condition.

NEA has developed a pilot risk-based food inspection framework. The framework assigns different levels of risk to different food types based surveillance data and the nature of the food. Hawker stalls are similarly assigned to different risk categories based the type of food sold. The frequency of inspection is thereafter based on these risk categories.

NEA has also developed a Community Partnership to Strengthen Safety in Food (COMPASS) which is an electronic platform to detect food poisoning clusters and outbreaks in Singapore. The partnership is developed together with the Singapore School of Public Health.

2.7.2 Event-based surveillance and risk assessment

Dr Tomoe Shimada, Medical Officer Emerging Disease Surveillance and Response, WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific delivered a presentation about event-based surveillance (EBS) and risk assessment. Dr Shimada explained about the IHR and their relationship to the APSED. Surveillance was defined as systematic ongoing collection, collation and analysis of data and the timely dissemination of information to those who need to know so that action can be taken. The objectives of surveillance are to detect unusual numbers of cases; monitor trends; evaluate interventions; provide evidence; and provide research questions.
Event-based surveillance includes rapid detection, reporting, confirmation and assessment of public health events including clusters of diseases and rumour of unexplained deaths. An event could include a rare or undefined condition or a disease that raises concern. An event may also be a disease known or suspected to have possible impact on human health or a hazard potentially exposed to humans.

Event-based and indicator-based surveillance (IBS) are two complementary systems and there are pros and cons associated with both. While reporting in an EBS system is ad-hoc, reporting in IBS is pre-defined. The sources of information also differ from media, schools, companies, the general public etc. in an EBS system, to the use of official government sources and designated disease reporting units in an IBS system. In an EBS system, action is triggered by initial risk assessment while in an IBS system action is triggered by pre-defined thresholds. The advantages of a EBS system is rapid detection while the IBS system is better structured. The disadvantages of an EBS system include sensitivity and the need for verification of data based on data quality and source. In an IBS system only diseases under surveillance are detected and reporting is usually scheduled which may delay reporting.

In WHO EBS is based on data from official as well as unofficial sources. After initial risk assessment and verification, a rapid risk assessment may be carried out and appropriate response action may be taken. The criteria for initial risk assessment include that the event should be unusual and/or unexpected; higher than expected rates of mortality and/or morbidity; clusters of cases; high potential for spread; related to a commercial product; and potential for international travel and trade impact. In order to support initial risk assessment, an algorithm has been developed and follows a stepwise approach.

Since 2009-2010, the number of reported public health events in WPRO has slightly decreased to 217 events in 2012-2013. These events included infectious diseases; animal H5N1; disasters and others; and chemical events. Most events were reported through official channels. INFOSAN and the IHR play an important role in reporting on events related to foodborne diseases. It is important that the two work in close collaboration and share information as appropriate.

The presentation concluded that EBS covers food related events, which have been reported through various types of source of information. Food related diseases are sometimes intersectional between INFOSAN and IHR and cross sectional information sharing is important for timely risk assessment and response.

2.7.3 Public health emergency preparedness

Dr Chin-Kei Lee, Team Leader, Emerging Disease Surveillance and Response, WHO WPRO presented about public health emergency preparedness. He highlighted that public health emergency preparedness is a key component of the APSED 2010. In 2013, 78% of 26 selected countries in the WPRO region reported that they have emergency preparedness plans in place. This is an increase by 8% since 2012.

Experience has shown that a common operational platform for command, control and coordination of emergency response is very important. This is related to the need for a common mechanism to link the right people with right expertise for the right roles to ensure effective coordinated response. It is equally important that information is collected in a timely manner and that risk assessments are conducted in order to inform and enable decision-making. However, country/event contexts and circumstances should be taken into account and systems designed accordingly.
The APSED vision for public health emergency preparedness says “Member States in the Asia Pacific region will have an overarching, flexible national public health emergency preparedness and response plan (PHEP) and a command and control system in place, supported by a functional Emergency Operation Centre (EOC), to effectively respond to all acute public health emergencies of national and international concern, including an influenza pandemic”. The EOC consists of appropriate facilities and functions and is intended to be used by ministries of health for implementation of an incident management system and integrated response logistics system.

By 2013, all Member States in the WPRO region will have established an EOC within the Ministry of Health and by 2015, the EOC should be able to support all key functions required in responding to public health emergencies.

The WHO Western Pacific Regional Office has established an EOC and an event management team with an overall event coordinator; an event manager and four teams covering 1) information and epidemiology; 2) technical expertise; 3) communications; and 4) core services. The system takes a two tier approach with emergency planning in tier one and increasing readiness in tier two.

Cross programme coordination of resources and a generic plan to cover cross-cutting approaches has shown to be very useful in terms of making better use of limited resources and maintaining preparedness across different diseases. A coordinated planning mechanism, such as the APSED framework, can be useful at national level.

Achievements so far have been built on preparedness and response to pandemic influenza and emerging infectious diseases (EID). The lessons learned can be used for other EIDs and public health emergencies, but capacity building is still needed for countries to strengthen pandemic preparedness; EIDs and public health emergency planning.

2.7.4 Food safety emergency response plan: experience in Thailand

Mrs Jongkolnee Vithayarungruangsri, Director of Bureau of Food Safety Extension and Support (BFSES), Ministry of Public Health, Thailand presented about Thailand’s experience in developing a food safety emergency response plan. Mrs Vithayarungruangsri informed that there are three main agencies designated by laws to ensure food safety. These are Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives; Ministry of Public Health; and the Ministry of Interior. The National INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point is within BFSES, MOH.

In 2012, with support from FAO, BFSES developed a food safety emergency response (FSER) plan for Thailand. The development of the plan took a stepwise approach. The first step was to conduct a consultative meeting and obtain high-level support for establishment of a working group to draft the FSER plan. The second step was to conduct a national workshop to review the existing system for food safety emergency response; information; networking; laws and regulations; food safety incidence management practices; medical report for illness etc. The third step was to conduct a national seminar where stakeholders were invited to a review the draft plan. The fourth step in the process of developing a FSER plan was to conduct a regional meeting for ASEAN to share experiences from 10 ASEAN countries on developing FSER plans.
The FSER plan for Thailand consists of the following seven chapters: 1) Introduction; 2) Definition and Scope; 3) Multiagency Coordination Group (MACG) and Procedure during Emergency Situation; 4) Incident Identification; 5) Incident Management; 6) Post-incident Review and Evaluation; and 7) Communication. For each chapter, clear steps and procedures are outlined and roles and responsibilities of concerned agencies are clearly defined. Decision trees are used to guide action and ensure consistency of decisions.

Since 2012, standard operating procedures for the management and implementation of the FSER plan at provincial level have been developed. These plans define the roles and responsibilities between stakeholders at different levels.

Some of the challenges encountered in the development of the FSER plan for Thailand included mobilization of all concerned key stakeholders throughout the food chain and understanding the impact of food safety emergency outbreaks on public health, trade and economic development. Differences in dietary behavior across the country and data collection including medical reports were also identified as key challenges.

2.7.5 Plenary discussion

During the plenary discussion a question about the definition of a food hawker in Singapore was raised. Dr Ching explained that a hawker is a small-scale business operating in a hawker centre. She also informed that as opposed to food courts which are operated by private food businesses, hawker centres are subsidized by the government.

A question was also raised about mechanisms for communication in the FSER plan for Thailand. Mrs Vithayarungruangsri explained that communication builds on existing systems and food safety committees at provincial level are responsible for communication within their respective provinces.

3. CONCLUSIONS

3.1 INFOSAN ASIA

(1) INFOSAN provides an important platform for information sharing and cooperation between countries on emergency-related food safety events as well as on-going information sharing of food safety issues of international concern. Since the last meeting in 2012, INFOSAN has demonstrated considerable added value to the food control systems in the region by providing information for action and keeping Member States up-to-date during serious food safety events;

(2) The meeting acknowledged the progress made in the implementation of the Strategy for enhancing INFOSAN in Asia and the importance of integrating the outcome of discussions into future work programmes of the Secretariat and Member States;

(3) Food trade is of critical importance to the Asian region and the meeting recognized the importance of INFOSAN in the early detection of and rapid response to food safety incidents of potential international concern;
(4) The value of face-to-face meetings of INFOSAN Emergency Contact Points and INFOSAN Focal Points was recognized as a method to build capacity and develop and strengthen the network;

(5) The importance of strengthening in-country linkages and communication between National IHR Focal Points, INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point, and INFOSAN Focal Points was recognized and mechanisms to further develop these linkages should be considered;

(6) While it is recognized that many different languages are spoken in the region, this should not be a barrier to sharing information on the INFOSAN community website.

3.2 Effective national food control systems

(1) Food safety is recognized as a major public health issue and a concern for international food trade and economic development;

(2) Food safety is a shared responsibility and all stakeholders have a part to play in ensuring a safe and wholesome food supply;

(3) An effective national food control system is essential to protect public health, prevent fraud, avoid food adulteration and facilitate fair practice in food trade;

(4) To be effective, a national food control system requires coordinated management throughout the food chain continuum and ensuring effective communication;

(5) Regulatory control of food safety is usually a responsibility shared between national, regional and local government authorities and a commitment to cooperation between all of these is essential;

(6) Food legislation should include clear provisions that describe how these different national bodies and agencies cooperate and collaborate to ensure the consistent implementation of food safety controls;

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 INFOSAN ASIA

(1) Countries are encouraged to strengthening in-country linkages and communication between National IHR Focal Points, INFOSAN Emergency Contact Points, and INFOSAN Focal Points by establishing committees or working groups and/or establishing formal or informal agreements/arrangements detailing methods of cooperation.

(2) In order to strengthen capacity-building within the INFOSAN network it recommended to identify opportunities for cross-cutting collaboration with programmes that support Member States in meeting their IHR core capacity requirements.
(3) The meeting recognized the importance of countries taking appropriate action on INFOSAN alerts. As a guide, countries either directly or through the INFOSAN Secretariat, are encouraged to share information about what action they are taking in particular cases.

(4) Countries in the Asian region should consider continuing collective efforts to contribute to early detection of and rapid response to food safety incidents of potential international concern, as well as supporting further INFOSAN activities in the region and globally.

(5) It is recommended that INFOSAN members continue to use the Community Website and use training material developed by the Secretariat.

(6) WHO should facilitate operational communication on food safety related instances between national IHR Focal Points and INFOSAN Emergency Contact Points and INFOSAN Focal Points.

(7) It is recommended that WHO and FAO continue to work with countries to convene regional forums on food safety to review progress, share country practices, and address common issues related to INFOSAN development and national food control system strengthening. It is proposed to hold the next regional meeting in early 2015.

4.2 Effective national food control systems

(1) Member States should strengthen their national food safety system by developing or updating their national plans of action in line with relevant regional food safety strategies and by incorporating the recommended actions for strengthening INFOSAN in Asia;

(2) WHO, FAO and partners should support implementation of national food safety plans including coordination mechanisms and explore the possibility of conducting simulation exercises to test interagency communication and coordination mechanisms and operating procedures;

(3) Member States should put in place mechanisms to monitor and evaluate progress on national food control systems strengthening and use existing monitoring tools such as the IHR core capacity monitoring questionnaire;

(4) Countries may wish to consider developing grading systems for the catering sector (e.g. restaurants, street food vendors) to inform consumers about levels of compliance and encourage food service operators to improve food safety practices;

(5) Countries may wish to consider alternative opportunities for risk communication such as mobile phones and social media.
ANNEX 1

In collaboration with and support from the Korea Ministry of Food and Drug Safety

MEETING ON STRENGTHENING INFOSAN
AND NATIONAL FOOD CONTROL SYSTEMS
IN ASIA

Manila, Philippines
10-12 December 2013

ENGLISH ONLY

PROVISIONAL PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITIES

Day 1 – Tuesday, 10 December 2013

08:30 – 09:00 Registration

09:00 – 10:00 Opening session

Welcome and opening remarks

Dr Han Tieru
- Director, Programme Management,
WHO Regional Office for the Western Pacific  (WHO/WPRO)

Ms Shashi Sareen
Senior Food and Nutrition Officer,
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (FAO/RAP)

Self-introductions
Overview of objectives and agenda
Nomination of Chairs and Rapporteur
Administrative announcements
Group photo

10:00 – 10:30 Coffee break

10:30 – 12:00 Plenary 1: Global update on food safety

10:30 – 10:50 Global update on food safety
- Dr Kazuaki Miyagishima, WHO/HQ

10:50 – 11:10 Global update on food safety and Codex work
- Ms Shashi Sareen, FAO/RAP

11:10 – 11:30 IHR implementation: Opportunity for food safety
- Dr Li Ailan, WHO/WPRO

11:30 – 11:45 INFOSAN: Progress and strategic directions
- Dr Peter Ben Embarek, INFOSAN Secretariat

11:45 – 12:00 Questions and clarifications

12:00 – 13:00 Lunch break

13:00 – 15:00 Plenary 2: Strengthening INFOSAN in Asia

13:00 – 13:30 Strategy for enhancing INFOSAN in Asia
- Dr Peter Ben Embarek and Mr Carmen Savelli, INFOSAN Secretariat

13:30 – 14:10 INFOSAN and National Actions

13:30 – 13:50 - Republic of Korea

13:50 – 14:10 - Myanmar

14:10 – 14:50 Questions and clarifications

14:50 – 15:00 Introduction to group work 1
- Mr Carmen Savelli, INFOSAN Secretariat

15:00 – 15:30 Coffee break

15:30 – 17:00 Group work 1: INFOSAN in Asia

17:30 – 19:30 Welcome reception

Day 2 – Wednesday, 11 December 2013

08:30 – 09:00 Summary of day 1

09:00 – 10:00 Plenary 3: National food control systems: regional update

09:00 – 09:15 FAO's work for Asia and the Pacific
- Ms Shashi Sareen, FAO/RAP

09:15 – 09:30 Strengthening food safety in the South-East Asia Region
- Dr Kunal Bagchi, WHO/SEARO
09:30 – 09:45 Strengthening food safety in the Western Pacific Region
- Dr Li Ailan and Mr Peter Hoejskov, WHO/WPRO

09:45 – 10:00 Questions and clarifications

10:00 – 10:30 Coffee break

10:30 – 12:30 Plenary 4: National food control systems: country actions and experiences
- Bhutan
- China
- Lao People's Democratic Republic
- Nepal
- Republic of Korea

12:10 – 12:30 Questions and clarifications

12:30 – 13:30 Lunch break

13:30 – 15:00 Plenary 5: Working towards an effective national food control system
- Current guidance on an effective food control system
  Professor Alan Reilly, Food Safety Authority, Ireland
- Coordinated national capacity assessment and planning: Experience in Cambodia
  - Cambodia

14:30 – 14:50 Questions and clarifications

14:50 – 15:00 Introduction to group work 2
- Mr Peter Hoejskov and Mr Jang Hwan Bae, WHO/WPRO

15:00 – 15:30 Coffee break

15:30 – 17:00 Group work 2: Towards an effective national food control system

  Group A – Governance, coordination and regulatory frameworks
  Group B – Risk based food inspection and enforcement
  Group C – Food safety emergency preparedness and response
  Group D – Food safety awareness, training and education
Day 3 – Thursday, 12 December 2013

08:30 – 08:40 Summary of day 2

08:40 – 10:00 Plenary 6: Feedback from group work 2

Group A – Governance, coordination and regulatory frameworks
Group B – Risk based food inspection and enforcement
Group C – Food safety emergency preparedness and response
Group D – Food safety awareness, training and education

Questions and discussion

10:00 – 10:30 Coffee break

10:30 – 12:00 Plenary 7: Opportunity for cross-programme collaboration

10:30 – 10:45 Healthy markets for safer food
- Dr Ng Lee Ching, Singapore

10:45 – 11:00 Event-based surveillance and risk assessment
- Dr Shimada Tomoe, WHO/WPRO

11:00 – 11:15 Public health emergency preparedness
- Dr Chin Kei Lee, WHO/WPRO

11:15 – 11:30 Food safety emergency response plan: experience in Thailand
- Mrs Jongkolnee Vithayarungruangsri,
  Bureau of Food Safety Extension and Support, Thailand

11:30 – 12:00 Questions and discussion

12:00 – 13:30 Lunch break

13:30 – 14:30 Plenary 8: Conclusions and recommendations

Closing session

Closing remarks
- Dr Jin-Young Yang, Director General
  Ministry of Food and Drug Safety, Republic of Korea
  - World Health Organization

14:30 – 15:00 Coffee break
ANNEX 2

In collaboration with and support from the Korea Ministry of Food and Drug Safety

MEETING ON STRENGTHENING INFOSAN AND NATIONAL FOOD CONTROL SYSTEMS IN ASIA

Manila, Philippines
10-12 December 2013

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