

FAO/ILSI/ILSI-INDIA
South Asian Conference on Food Safety

Heritage Village, Delhi, India, 11-13 December 2000

Main Conclusions and Recommendations

General – Coordination and Follow-up

The Conference discussed the food control situation in the SAARC countries and highlighted similarities as well as differences in both the organizational aspects of food control systems and the problems faced by the countries in their efforts to meet the needs for ensuring consumer protection and promoting regional and international food trade.

The Conference reaffirmed the pertinence and validity of the conclusions and recommendations of the FAO/ILSI Workshop on Science Based Approaches to Harmonization of Regulatory Food Quality and Safety Measures in SAARC Region held in Delhi in September 1998. It recommended that urgent action be taken to implement the recommendations of the 1998 Workshop and agreed on the following immediate actions:

- ◆ **FAO should request the nomination in each country of a focal point for the exchange of information on food control matters among the SAARC countries, including any new food regulation or food safety measure, food poisoning emergencies, food detentions/rejections in importing countries, new developments in food control infrastructures, or other relevant information. The focal point should also be responsible for following up on the recommendations of the present Conference as well as on those of the 1998 Workshop.**
- ◆ **The SAARC Countries should initiate the harmonization of their food safety measures and food control and import inspection and certification procedures as indicated in the 1998 Workshop, using Codex standards, guidelines and recommendations as a basis. To initiate this process, a careful review should be made of the existing food laws and regulations to identify the main differences and diversions from the international standards. These tasks should be divided among the above focal points under the coordination of FAO. The following distribution of tasks has been agreed to initiate the harmonization process:**
 - **For Bangladesh: Fish and Fisheries products**
 - **For India: Cereals, Pulses and Legumes + Processed Fruits and Vegetables + Milk and Milk Products**

- For Nepal: Fats and Oils
- For Pakistan: Meat and Meat Products
- For Sri Lanka: Herbs and Spices

A meeting should then be organized to discuss these differences and agree on a common ground that would satisfy all countries concerned, and at the same time respond to international requirements under the SPS and TBT Agreements.

In carrying out the harmonization process, consideration must be given to the following:

- level of protection should be uniform for all countries to eliminate possible non-tariff barriers to trade;
- risk assessment and the measures to control the risk, i.e. risk management, call for appropriate expertise, and countries of the region should make every effort to develop this expertise in their national interest. Technical cooperation among the countries (TCDC) is required to achieve this goal;
- Codex standards, guidelines and recommendations provide the most appropriate basis on which harmonization can be achieved while at the same time ensuring conformity with WTO's SPS and TBT requirements;
- risk communication should be enhanced both in quality and content, so as to strengthen consumer's confidence in food safety measures. It should be implemented at the early stage of risk assessment.

Specific issues

A- Microbiological Challenges

The Conference noted that the food sector comprises three categories of foods with inherent levels of susceptibility to microbiological contamination viz. non-perishables (cereals, pulses, etc), semi perishables (fruits and vegetables) and perishables (meat, fish, poultry). It recommended that priority be given to the implementation of HACCP procedures to the "perishables" category and that experience gained with this category of foods should be used to improve the hygienic quality and safety of other foods;

The Conference recognized the need to adopt an integrated approach in the control of foodborne microbiological loads, covering the entire food chain. It emphasized that the food processing unit alone cannot bear the entire burden, and those farmers, processors, and distributors should be involved in all preventive and control actions.

The Conference stressed the need for technical personnel in food processing units to be trained and assisted in designing and implementing a microbiological control system. It recommended the establishment in large

food processing units of food analysis laboratories, including facilities for microbiological analysis as a systemic tool for compliance and control.

The Conference recognized the need to generate, collate and analyze data on microorganisms and foodborne diseases of particular concern to SAARC countries, in terms of exposure, specific risks involved and the control targets to be achieved. In particular, existing and emerging pathogens that are of particular relevance to the SAARC region need to be identified and studied. Data on food borne illnesses in the countries concerned would provide a platform for specific actions on identified pathogens.

The Conference noted that education, awareness and training must precede regulatory measures. It recommended the setting up of Task Forces comprising all players in implementation e.g. the farmers, food processors, government regulators, health policy makers, etc. develop strategies for compliance with regulatory requirements and establish appropriate timeframes.

B- Chemical Challenges

The Conference discussed the work underway in different countries of the region to monitor and control pesticide residues in foods. It stressed the need to generate more data on the level of pesticide residues in different food crops for use in risk assessment work and for ensuring effective consumer protection.

The Conference highlighted the importance of training farmers on the strict application of good agricultural practices in the use of pesticides. It recommended that extension services give this matter the necessary priority in their work program.

The Conference reconfirmed the list of pesticides most commonly used in the SDAAARC countries, namely: *Endosulphan, Monocrotophos, Malathion, Cypermethrin, Methyl Parathion, Dimethoate, Quinalphos, Phosphamidon, Isoproturon, DDVP, Fenitrothion, Lindane* and *Carbofuran*. It recommended that national food control programs include the monitoring of the residues of these pesticides in food crops. It also agreed that countries of the region should harmonize their MRLs with those of Codex.

The Conference recommended that countries of the SAARC region introduce integrated pest management programs and biological pest control techniques to reduce the use of chemical pesticides and protect the environment.

The Conference agreed that aflatoxins, ochratoxins, fumonisins, zearalenone and trichothecenes constitute the priority mycotoxins for the SAARC region. It recommended that necessary guideline levels be established for these mycotoxins taking into account the evaluation work carried out by JECFA and other risk assessment bodies on these contaminants and the

recommendations of the Codex Alimentarius Commission. It emphasized the need for developing countries to get access to rapid and simple methods for the detection and quantification of mycotoxins in different food items. The Conference further stressed the need to apply HACCP-based methods for the prevention of mycotoxin formation on food crops and to ensure that this is applied throughout the food chain. The development of mycotoxin-resistant varieties was seen as yet another means of preventing mycotoxin contamination. The Conference agreed on the need for an integrated approach to mycotoxin prevention and control using all techniques and methods available.

C - Food Allergies

The Conference recognized that food allergies are of growing consumer concern worldwide. Most studies of food allergens, however, have been conducted in developed countries and relate to food products that are not necessarily of relevance to South Asian countries. The Conference further recognized the need for the SAARC countries to conduct specific studies to identify those local foodstuffs which could cause allergic reactions.

The Conference recommended that labeling of allergenic foods should be limited to those food products with confirmed allergic reaction.

The Conference recognized the need for capacity building in the SAARC countries on all matters related to food allergens: better equipped laboratories and well trained manpower to analyze and carry out the tests on allergic substances. It recommended that effort be made to organize training courses at sub-regional level using available facilities such as the ones at the Vallabhbhai Patel Chest Institute, University of Delhi, India.

D - Genetically Modified Foods

The Conference was informed of recent developments in the production and distribution of genetically modified foods and the techniques used for this purpose. It noted the increase in acreage and value of transgenic plants produced during the period 1995-99, and the increasing number of transgenic crops and traits introduced. Most of this production (82%) occurred in the developed part of the world, although a number of developing countries, including India, were making remarkable breakthrough.

The Conference noted that while transgenic food crops present a number of advantages in terms of productivity, resistance to pests, nutritional value, shelf life, and others, they are still not accepted by the consumer, in both developed and developing countries. In particular, their safety both to humans and to the environment is still questioned. The work underway in the framework of the Codex Task Force on Foods Derived from Biotechnology and by the FAO/WHO expert consultations on the assessment of GM foods, should enable a better understanding of the possible health and environmental effects of the transgenic food crops.

The Conference noted that risk communication concerning GM foods has been insufficient and inadequate and did not succeed in gaining consumer confidence. It agreed that more effort was needed in this field by all concerned in the private sector as well as in the public. It also noted that governments are increasingly adopting mandatory labeling, rigorous testing, and restrictive measures over GM products, including banning those of questionable safety.

The Conference noted that labeling choices being made by countries fell into 2 main categories. In the first one which included among others EU, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, mandatory labeling was being pursued. In the other category (including USA) voluntary labeling was the main strategy. The Conference was further informed of the current status of the discussion on labeling of GM foods under the Codex Committee on Food Labeling.

The conference recommended that:

1. consideration be given to expedite the risk assessment of GM food crops so that they contribute positively to food security, health, and nutrition.
2. ethical and moral concerns over GM foods should not be generalized and should be considered on a case by case basis;
3. negotiation of agreements concerning GM food crops should consider first the benefit to alleviation of poverty, improving nutrition and food security;
4. effort be made to assist developing countries of the region in capacity building and human resource development in all aspects of biotechnology, so that maximum benefit can be gained from this technology.
5. the Department of Biotechnology, India, serves as a center of excellence in this field for all countries of the SAARC region.