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WELTGESUNDHEITSORGANISATION
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ВСЕМИРНАЯ ОРГАНИЗАЦИЯ ЗДРАВООХРАНЕНИЯ
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SUMMARY REPORT

Final UNDP Steering Committee Meeting on Food Safety

Vilamoura, Portugal
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EUR/HFA target 22

ABSTRACT

Ensuring food safety is a continuing challenge, particularly in this period of economic change in the European Region. The Steering Committee of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) food safety project held its final meeting to review the progress made within the project and to discuss future collaboration in the Region after its conclusion. The project succeeded as a first step in establishing food safety systems by more clearly identifying countries' needs and demonstrating the value of a Regionwide approach to food safety issues. The Steering Committee recommended several means for continued collaboration on food safety in the Region. These included: an expanded WHO regional programme on food safety, wider membership and a new mandate for the Steering Committee, priority tasks for countries, projects for concerted action in the countries of central and eastern Europe, special projects for some countries in western Europe, and increased cooperation between sectors in countries and between international organizations.

TARGET 22

FOOD QUALITY AND SAFETY

By the year 2000, health risks due to microorganisms or their toxins, to chemicals and to radioactivity in food should have been significantly reduced in all Member States.

Keywords:

FOOD CONTAMINATION - prevent/control
FOOD INSPECTION
FOOD ANALYSIS
INFORMATION SYSTEMS
(1) UNDP
EUR

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Introduction

The Meeting was convened by the WHO Regional Office for Europe in agreement with the Government of Portugal. The participants included 16 experts from 11 countries, 4 temporary advisers and 3 observers. The Meeting was held to review progress in the implementation of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) food safety project at the international and national levels, and to discuss future collaboration on food safety by the countries of the European Region. Establishing international networks of national food safety focal points was the backbone of the project, and impressive progress was achieved in building up several European programme networks. The sustainability of the international networks after the termination of the UNDP project was to be discussed, and attention was to be given to the option of starting a regional project to assist the countries of central and eastern Europe with two tasks: the reorganization of their food law enforcement systems to reflect general European trends, and the improvement of the quality and efficiency of their food safety services.

Discussion and conclusions

Review of progress

The Steering Committee examined in some detail the progress made towards achieving the three principal objectives of the project.

The first objective had two parts; the first was surveillance of foodborne infections and intoxications. The Steering Committee was informed of the outcome and recommendations of two meetings on surveillance that were held in Berlin in 1989 and 1990. In addition, a short presentation was made on the data supplied to the surveillance centre by the countries entitled to financial help from UNDP, according to the indicative planning figures (IPF). The data supplied by these and other European countries identified a number of areas that require improved reporting. The Steering Committee considered that the surveillance system at the national level could be improved through the following measures:

- training of staff in the epidemiological investigation of outbreaks of foodborne infections and intoxications;
- the standardization of laboratory methods;
- the further standardization and use of a common coding system covering agents, foods, places of contamination and the consumption of contributing factors;
- the establishment of the WHO alert (early warning) system for outbreaks of international interest, as proposed in the objectives of the surveillance system; and
- the introduction of quick data transfer between the national contact points and the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO)/WHO collaborating centre for research and training in food hygiene and zoonoses, in Berlin.

As recommended by the Steering Committee in 1990, the task of establishing a European monitoring programme for food contamination became the second part of the first project objective. This programme will be based on the Joint United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)/FAO/WHO Food Contamination Monitoring Programme (GEMS/Food). It was also decided that the programme would be modified to meet the requirements of European countries. These would be concerned with sampling, methods of analysis, analytical quality and data processing, as recommended at consultations held in Zadar, Yugoslavia in 1990 and Malta in 1991. The selection of contaminants and foods to be monitored will reflect the priorities for the European Region as a whole. The programme will develop internationally agreed principles on national dietary intake studies; these are a prerequisite to interpreting data and assessing exposure to hazardous chemicals and associated potential risks.

The second objective of the UNDP project concerned the use of the hazard analysis critical control point (HACCP) system as a tool for the enforcement of food law and in ensuring food safety in tourism. These two areas had been identified as very important for the IPF countries.

The Steering Committee was informed of the outcome of three meetings on food safety held in Brussels in 1989, Larnaca, Cyprus in 1990 and Budapest in 1991. The principal activities under this objective have been training seminars on the application of the HACCP system.

Achieving the wide use of the HACCP system would require governments to consider the following. First, the system is self-regulating and its use needs to be promoted. Second, it should be adapted to the particular needs of each food establishment. For small food companies or catering establishments, the application of all HACCP system procedures may not be appropriate, although the general approach and risk assessment in particular would be beneficial. Third, the employment of the HACCP system in food law enforcement requires self-regulation by the food industry and comprehensive training for food industry and government inspection staff in HACCP procedures.

The third objective concerned an information system on food safety services in the Region. The WHO Regional Office for Europe had surveyed existing information systems in the Region and was considering establishing an appropriate database for the updating of its publication on food safety services. Member States would be approached in the near future to supply updated information for a new edition, which could be made available in loose-leaf form to facilitate more frequent updating. The content and format of the publication were under review. A new edition would provide more information on the organization of national food safety services in organigrams and on food laws, and contain a major section relating to European Community (EC) requirements in respect of the Single Market.

Following the review of progress towards the objectives of the UNDP project and the discussion of outstanding matters in the conclusion of the project, the Steering Committee considered the steps needed to ensure the continuation of the programmes and networks that had been established.

The project was only the first step in the process of establishing effective systems for food safety in Europe. It had served an important purpose in identifying more clearly the needs of Member States. It had also

clearly demonstrated the value of an international or Regionwide approach to issues of food safety. A Regionwide approach was particularly necessary in this current period of great changes in Europe, such as the move towards a European Single Market, the closer association of EC and the countries of the European Free Trade Association (EFTA), and the reconstruction of the economies of the countries of central and eastern Europe.

Country reports

In addition, the Steering Committee received written and oral reports from the countries participating in the UNDP project. These indicated the progress made in reaching the objectives of the project, and identified the needs of each country for the continuation of the various activities initiated under the project.

The country reports stressed the importance of having an appropriate national intersectoral mechanism for the setting and implementation of policies, strategies and priorities in food safety. This could be achieved by the continuation or establishment of a national intersectoral food safety committee, composed of senior officials from major government departments. Its intersectoral nature would require such a committee to be established at a ministerial level. A national food safety committee would be of particular value in helping the government to obtain an overview of existing food legislation and enforcement services, and the improvements they require. This would be particularly useful in countries facing major organizational changes. The committee could also serve as a link to the WHO Regional Office for Europe and other international organizations and programmes.

Further, the Steering Committee recognized the situation facing countries that formerly received funds from UNDP and now have applied to join or already have associate membership in the EC, particularly Cyprus and Malta. To participate fully in the developments in food safety in the Region, these countries will continue to require technical and financial assistance in the further upgrading and reorganization of their food safety services to bring them into conformity with EC directives, particularly those related to the Single Market.

Recommendations

1. The WHO Regional Office for Europe should find the ways and means, in collaboration with the Commission of the European Communities (CEC) - through, for example, its PHARE and European Nervous System (ENS) programmes, UNDP, the World Bank and other possible sources of funding - to develop and implement an expanded WHO regional programme on food safety in Europe.

2. The new approach should be pan-European in scope and in line with the regional strategy for health for all. Close collaboration between the Regional Office and CEC would be essential to the prevention and control of foodborne diseases and the implementation of a Regionwide food safety programme.

3. To ensure effective collaboration among all European countries, the membership of the Steering Committee should be widened to include

representatives of all the Member States of the European Region, and the body should thereafter be known as the WHO European Food Safety Committee.

A major role for the enlarged Committee should be to oversee the WHO regional food safety programme, to ensure that the various other activities in the Region harmonize with and complement each other, and to establish appropriate links between these activities to achieve the objectives of the WHO regional strategy for health for all. The WHO European Food Safety Committee could have an important role in:

- advising the Regional Office, a first task being to advise on the First European Conference on Food Safety, to be held in 1993;
- implementing the regional food safety programme;
- providing a forum for the exchange of information on important issues for the Region and the development of contacts between countries and institutions through, for example, twinning;
- facilitating technical collaboration to achieve common objectives;
- identifying needs and deficiencies in programmes and projects, and reformulating and developing complementary activities; and
- reviewing and offering advice on food safety programmes in the Region.

4. Countries should continue or establish national intersectoral food safety committees. The members should be senior officials of government departments concerned with health, food and agriculture, industry and trade, the environment, economic development and finance. Such a committee should be set up by the prime minister or the cabinet, and its tasks would be to gain an overview of food legislation and its enforcement, and to serve as a link with WHO and other international organizations.

5. In the light of the Steering Committee's review of the UNDP project and its discussion of the need to secure the continuation of these activities to cope with the changing circumstances in the Region, the following should be the priority tasks for countries:

- adapting or reorganizing food safety services to meet the overall requirements of the Region;
- organizing an effective surveillance programme and epidemiological services for foodborne diseases;
- organizing an effective programme to monitor contaminants in food and drinking-water;
- preventing food contamination by environmental factors;
- upgrading food safety, particularly in the food industry and tourism; and
- developing and strengthening food safety information systems.

6. Considering these priorities and the current needs of the central and eastern European countries, the Steering Committee prepared three projects for

concerted action in these countries for submission to PHARE for funding; the projects proposed are:

- to upgrade food safety services,
- to prevent food contamination by environmental factors,
- to improve food safety in tourism.

7. Because a number of areas covered by the projects proposed by the Steering Committee will be particularly important to Cyprus, Malta and Turkey, the WHO Regional Office for Europe should seek funding to implement appropriate projects in these countries.