



INTERNATIONAL HEADS OF FOOD AGENCIES FORUM

The Second Annual
Meeting under the theme
“Modernization of Food System”

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AGENCIES FORUM**

The Second Annual
Meeting Report

March 1, 2021

Introduction:


A sustainable food system lies at the heart of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Adopted in 2015, the SDGs call for major transformations in agriculture and food systems in order to end hunger, achieve food security and improve nutrition by 2030.

FAO defines a Food System (FS) as the entire range of actors and their interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products that originate from agriculture, forestry or fisheries, and parts of the broader economic,

societal and natural environments in which they are embedded. Sub-systems such as farming, waste management or input supply systems, contribute to the FS and interact with other key systems such as health, energy, trade and their respective affiliates.

A sustainable food system (SFS) is also defined as a food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for future generations are not compromised.





Reshaping the global food system is imperative for achieving the SDGs and enabling the adaptation of the FS to the constant changes influencing all of its parts.

The recent global pandemic and its impact on the production, transport and distribution of food and agri-food products has highlighted the importance of the existence of a resilient Food System.

The Modernization of Food Regulatory Systems will need to support the ability for food systems to be more resilient and to adapt to the overwhelming fluctuations in the environment and public health situation.


The second meeting of the Heads of Food Agencies Forum discussed efforts to modernize food regulatory approaches, including those aiming to support the resilience of global supply chains in the context of the changing environment and in particular as a result of emerging issues such as the management of the global COVID-19 Pandemic. The ability to engage stakeholders and integrate risk communication efforts in response to such emerging threats was another area of expertise to be shared among members of the Forum.



Opening Session

**CEO of Saudi Food &
Drug Authority (SFDA)**

At the opening of the 2nd Annual Meeting, the **CEO of SFDA, Prof. Hisham Aljadhey** (co-convener) welcomed all participants and appreciated them for taking time to attend. He also noted that the number of organizations and heads of agencies joining the IHFAF has grown since the last meeting in January 2020 in Riyadh.



Prof. Aljadhey gave a brief overview of the IHFAF first meeting, the emergency meeting which was set up to address food safety issues arising as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and the executive meetings. Prof. Aljadhey announced the new IHFAF website and logo which consisted of the initials of the International Heads of Food Agencies Forum and a green leaf in the shape of a globe to represent food and heads of food agencies from all over the world.

Prof. Aljadhey highlighted several topics including Food System 6Gs and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which were set in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly and are intended to be achieved by the year 2030. His Excellency also shared some insights into the future of the global food system, indicating to an ever-increasing demand for such a system and the challenges which may compromise the ability for food systems to provide safe, nutritious and sustainable food.

Prof. Aljadhey concluded by urging all participants to share their experiences, looking forward to a fruitful meeting, and wishing everyone best of luck

Session 1

Modernization of regulatory systems



Chaired by


**the CEO of Food Standards
Australia New Zealand (FSANZ)**

The CEO of FSANZ, Mr. Mark Booth (co-convener) expressed that he is pleased to be in the forum and honored to chair the first session under the topic “Modernization of regulatory systems”. The session reflected on the fact that all countries need to evaluate their regulatory systems in order to ensure that they fit for purpose. In this session, two case studies were introduced, from Australia and Singapore.

Australia's Food Regulatory Modernization Journey

**Mr. Mark Booth,
CEO of FSANZ**

Mr. Mark Booth gave a brief about changing factors and some issues that facing the global food regulatory system. These issues increased the needs to modernize food regulatory system. A world-class food regulatory system must evolve and undergo continuous improvement, keep pace with the expectations of consumers, the food industry and Ministers. Due to issues in term of technological changes, governments were putting increased pressure on food regulatory agencies to reduce regulatory burden for food exporters.



Mr. Booth highlighted some of the key issues of FSANZ current legislation. If the issues were not addressed, people confidence would decrease as the food system becomes unresponsive. Therefore, FSANZ had to ensure that confidence was maintained within the food regulatory system and the food system as a whole; otherwise, emerging risks would go undetected.

Also, FSANZ had to ensure that they were forward looking in terms of emerging risks. Without changing, industry innovation would be stifled and with limited competitiveness. Therefore, FSANZ was heading to a complete review of the legislation.

Mr. Booth explored one of FSANZ work on Food Safety Modernization. A Framework that advanced the mandate of the APEC Food Safety Cooperation Forum to assist APEC economies in facilitating trade in food while protecting the health of consumers.

At the end, Mr. Booth raised a key question about the role of IHFAF in modernization of food regulatory system. The forum can provide leadership and support countries undertaking modernization.


Members have a requirement to ensure that they have consistency in implementation food safety modernization programs. Also, they have a collective role to protect consumer, facilitate trade and enable innovation in the areas that they were looking at.

Regulatory Transformation “From Regulator to Enabler”

**Dr. Tan Lee Kim,
CEO of Singapore Food
Agency (SFA)**

Dr. Tan Lee Kim gave an overview of SFA regulatory transformation including policy, system and technology. From an industry prospective, smart regulation were needed in regulatory systems. Local food industry was in a continuous going to new businesses models. There were new global trends and source constrains. Therefore, transformation was not an option, it was a must.

In the policy transformation, SFA focused on enabling innovation and food supply resilience. SFA provided novel food regulatory framework to support the global market and trade. Also, SFA developed Future Ready Food Safety Hub “FRESH” to build collaboration efforts, develop practical guidance and tools for assessment, and ease the market entry for novel food. In addition, to coping with COVID-19, SFA had agility in food trade facilitation and regulatory regime including certification and labeling requirements, food mobile stores and virtual inspection.



In the system transformation, SFA focused on enabling joint responsibility. SFA with other agencies established Safety Assurance for Food Establishments (SAFE) and building industry's competency to ensure food safety. Food establishments with higher food safety assurance were giving longer license duration. Also, SFA with Singapore Standards Council developed industry standards to provide guidance to companies. Other work related to system transformation was leverage on SAC-accredited 3rd party Conformity Assessment Bodies testing CAB for testing, inspection and Certification TIC.

Regarding technology transformation, SFA focused on enabling operations and data-driven food safety regime. Dr. Kim overviewed SFA Operations Center that facilitating sense making,


action synchronization and decision-making proceedings and acting as centralized command and control facility in incident response ops. SFA was focusing on technology transformation to ensure food safety and security and to enhance operational productivity. Dr. Kim overviewed Ops-Tech integration as an example. The app provided summary of daily inspection outcomes and inspection and location tracking. Moreover, SFA focused on data-driven insights on food safety hazards to monitor recent trends of food safety hazards through temporal analysis of horizon scanning and to provide predictive approach for food safety monitoring and insights using data science.

Dr. Kim ended her presentation by pointed out that people also important in regulatory transformation. People must be given tools and capabilities to ensure regulatory transformation.



In the first session, technology was important

as well as encouraging innovation. Industry was putting a pressure to reduce regulations and international standards. Therefore, IHFAF may consider dealing with this pressure without affecting food safety and consider ways to make food safety changes while keeping food regulation independent.



Session 2

Ensuring the resilience of global food supply chains through modernization



Chaired by

**the CEO of Food Safety Authority
of Ireland (FSAI)**

The CEO of FSA, Dr. Pamela A. Byrne (co-convener) welcomed participants and thanked SFDA for hosting the meeting. In the session, two presentations were given regarding resilience of global food supply chains. The first presentation was by FSAI and the second one was by FAO.

Ensuring the resilience of global food supply chains through modernization

**Dr. Pamela A. Byrne,
CEO of Food Safety
Authority of Ireland (FSAI)**

Dr. Byrne started with an overview of modernization in the global food supply chain system. Due to the complexity of the food sector, the extend of the supply chain and the numbers of organizations involved, cooperation and collaboration between key stakeholders is imperative to ensure food is safe to consume. Fortunately, these meetings of IHFAF provides this opportunity of cooperation and collaboration, working in partnership and learning from each other.

Advancing food safety and food control system is paramount to ensure consumer health is protected.

The safety of food is a result of actions of many stakeholders including farmers, food handlers, distributors, manufactures, service operations, consumers, regulators, scientists, educators and the media. Now, it is the time to bring these stakeholders together as this is a key component of several policy shifts. Dr. Byrne emphasized the importance of considering engagement with Sustainable Development Goals that were related to food systems, UN Climate Change Conference UK 2021, and UN Food Systems Summit 2021.



Dr. Byrne mentioned “Farm to Fork strategy” which is at the heart of the European Green Deal that aimed to reduce the environmental and climate footprint of the EU food system and strengthen its resilience, ensure food security in the face of climate change and biodiversity loss. The importance of focusing on “A sustainable food system” was highlighted to ensure environmental, social and economic sustainability without compromising EU high food safety standards. Dr. Byrne confirmed that integrated approach from farm to fork was needed to meet the challenges of the future.

Dr. Byrne explored the global food system map that served as a tool for illustrating the pathway from challenges to goals to support an ‘idealized’ food system that remains safe and authentic.

The map identified four general areas which are industry, technology, environment and consumer that could have a positive or a negative impact on the global food system.

Dr. Byrne raised several questions in the context of modernization (consumers, industry, technology and environment) and to ensure resilience of the global food supply chain. The questions were:

- Do all parts of an ecosystem need to be resilient?
- Is the global food system resilient to shocks?
- What parts do we need to modernize to ensure resilience?
- What do we need to do to strengthen the resilience of food control systems?
- What if COVID 19 was a foodborne virus? Are we prepared?

Dr. Byrne encouraged IHFAF to think about how to be prepared for future crisis events and concluded her presentation by the statement “If it is not safe, it is not food”.




Strengthening the Global Food Supply: Resilience, Recovery, Rebuilding, A Snapshot of Selected FAO Activities

**Dr. Markus Lipp,
Head of Food Safety and
Quality Unit, FAO**

Dr. Markus Lipp overviewed some FAO activities that aimed to strength the global food supply chain. Due to COVID-19, there was a general worsening of acute food insecurity. FAO was working in several areas one of them was the sustainable wildlife management. This program aimed to improve wildlife conservation and food security. Dr. Lipp talked about the FAO Hand- in-Hand initiative that aimed to accelerate agricultural transformation and sustainable rural development. Also, he overviewed some of FAO's work on nutrition and stressed on the importance of


finding opportunities to transform food system in a way that ensure its safety, avoiding disruptive the food system and affecting the availability of food. Transformation must be dynamic and cannot be a one step process.

FAO with WHO and Codex provided several documents related to food safety. Fundamentally, FAO worked to improve governments models and strengthen national food control capacities including trade facilities, capacity building and normative role. He pointed out to FAO/WHO food control systems assessment tool as an example of one of FAO helpful intervention. In addition, he elaborated about developing food safety intelligence and foresight including INFOSAN, EMPRESS, and technical networks. Dr. Lipp stated that FAOs work increased trust in food safety by strengthening national institutional capacities, improving public health, improving local value chains and improving public health and trade.



In the second session, the importance of food system transformation was acknowledged. Food system must be safer and not disruptive. Recognizing that countries food control systems were not in the same modernization stage can help to avoid risk food security. The importance of generating data and laborites system were highlighted

to improve food safety system. The more agencies invest in science, risk assessment, and laborites work, the better the food safety management. Agencies had to increase the capacity of tools and ways that generate and analyze data since one of the sustainable system challenging was how to use data and artificial intelligence. Therefore, it was important to have the ability to use data, understand data, and produce data-driven policy. In addition, it was considered the importance of learning about the impact of COVID-19 on food companies and their abilities to produce food to be able to keep supply chain going. These lessons would be helpful if future public health pandemic occurred.



Session 3

Modernization of risk communication practices



Chaired by
the CEO of SFDA

The CEO of SFDA, Prof. Hisham Aljadhey (co-convener) started the session by acknowledging the importance of risk communication in food safety and its huge impact on consumers, food industry and food regulators.

Modernization of Risk Communication Practices

**Dr. Hamoud Alnughaymishi,
Head of food risk communication
section in SFDA**

Dr. Hamoud Alnughaymishi talked about risk communication in SFDA and the external and internal risk communication activities. He elaborated on the strategical plan that was developed in 2018. He shared some of the external risk communication activities that included risk perception surveys, infographics, webinars and networking and the internal risk communication activities that included the role of risk communication within risk analysis framework, and food risk magazine.

In terms of plans, Dr. Alnughaymishi stated that SFDA would be trying to identify food safety awareness topic campaigns based on consumer concerns, collaborating with WHO to assess activities, and identify the gap in food risk perceptions among experts, food producers and consumers.

Lessons Learned During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Dr. Peter Ben Embarek,
INFOSAN - WHO**

Dr. Peter Ben Embarek started his presentation by highlighting that 2020 was a very challenging year because of COVID-19 pandemic. During the lock-down in many countries, only pharmacies and supermarkets/food shops remained opened illustrating the strategic role of a safe supply of food. There were concerns over the possibility of COVID-19 to find its way into our food and how to make food safe. Maintaining a safe food supply was critical as well as maintaining safe food production. Therefore, WHO and FAO jointly started developing guidelines to national food



safety authorities. The first guidance was for the national food safety authorities to respond to the new challenges of this new event including teleworking, protection of inspectors and premises, prioritization of inspections. Also, how to deal with reduced capacity of laboratories and communicate and support public health sector. The second guidance was for the food business to maintain a safe production environment and protecting food workers. Protecting food businesses were critical and how to communicate that to food businesses was a challenge for many national authorities. These two guidance documents were being revised now, particularly focusing on the safety on the work force rather than on food safety implications.

Dr. Ben Embarek highlighted some of the challenges including traditional food market and trading wild animals in markets. Finally, Dr. Ben Embarek highlighted a recent aspect related to COVID-19 and frozen food products which as a report from China found that COVID-19 contaminated imported frozen products.



Food Safety Risk Communication Post COVID

**Prof. Patrick Wall,
University College Dublin**

Prof. Patrick Wall started with Codex definition of risk communication that was mainly for risk assessors to communicate their opinions to risk managers. Nobody envisaged the explosion in communication with the public. Now, there has been a move to engage with the public in true communication “dialogue”. The challenge with risk communication is universal but the solution is country specific. In the last year, the public seemed to ignore food scares and to only focus on one risk, COVID19. Countries that had strong leaders and consistent messages had actually succeeded more.

In the past, one of the challenges was to communicate the science. But now the media talks about complicated topics. Failure to communicate with the public would leave a vacuum that caused exaggerated fear and growing media-fueled scare stories.



Prof. Wall acknowledged the importance of behavioral change in risk communication since communicating risks would require such conduct. Non-pharmaceutical interventions have been the key prior to the discovery of a vaccine. Some jurisdictions had achieved collective behavioral change and have changed social norms. Things which have recently become commonplace, such as elbow-bumping, wearing masks and social distancing were not normal in the past.


Prof. Wall emphasized the importance of sharing information for managing risk in the global food supply chain. He recognized that risks are multi-dimensional. The message would not get attraction if the consequences were severe. In addition, Prof. Wall reported that in some jurisdiction, risk management decisions were based on what was trending in twitter. Therefore, food agencies had to embrace the social media. Prof. Wall suggested to trigger the public to search for more information on the topic that agency interested in and to direct the public to credible source. People have shorter attentions spans. Therefore, agencies need to frame the message in such a way that hold people attention.





In the third session, the importance of making

science simple for the public was acknowledged. During COVID-19 pandemic, foodborne illnesses and contamination in the food supply systems declined. It would be interesting to understand the drivers for this drop. The importance of taking food safety and hygiene seriously was addressed due to its effective impact on the reduction of foodborne illnesses and contamination in food system. IHFAF had to look at these drivers at global level and identify things that can be done to increase the resilience of food systems globally.



Closing Remarks

CEO of SFDA, Prof. Hisham Aljadhey

(co-convener) shared some minor changes in IHFAF terms of references (ToR) as approved by the executive committee, namely the incorporation of the following statements “members can join the forum by submitting a proposal to the executive committee for review and approval” and “The host country can invite up to 3 observer countries to the meeting”. Prof. Aljadhey thanked members for attending the meeting and was looking forward to the physical meeting in Australia in 2022. Prof. Aljadhey proposed to have some activities during the year and encouraged all members to send suggestions.



CEO of FSAI, Dr. Pamela Byrne

(co-convener) thanked the participants and hoped that the participants enjoyed the meeting and got some useful information. She hoped as well that members would reflect on the topics discussed on the day, calling on members to consider some of the questions posed by the speakers. Dr. Byrne looked forward to seeing everybody in person in the next physical meeting in Australia.

CEO of FSANZ, Mr. Mark Booth

(co-convener) thanked the participants for contributing in the meeting. Mr. Booth pointed that the strength of this forum was the ability for coming together with common issues and discussing these issues in an environment where members can share lessons and look forward to implementing evidence-based work that can be shared between members. Mr. Booth was very positive about the future of this forum and was looking forward to welcoming all members in Australia in 2022.



