Side Event on Food Safety and SPS Measures in Africa

Hosted by France on the margins of the 32nd Session of the Codex Committee on General Principles
Organised by the African Union with the support of France and the European Commission
10th February 2021

MODERATOR'S REPORT

INTRODUCTION

The Side Event on Food Safety and SPS Measures in Africa was organised by the African Union with the support of France and the European Commission and it took place virtually on 10th February 2021 on the margins of the 32nd Session of the Codex Committee on General Principles (CCGP). The Side Event brought together an international audience of approximately 500 registered participants. Interpretation was provided in English, French and Spanish.

The main objective of the Side Event was to support the African Region's ongoing efforts towards facilitating food trade and ensuring food safety and food control in the context of the Agreement Establishing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). The Side Event also aimed at discussing options to support the endeavour of the FAO/WHO Regional Coordinating Committee for Africa (CCAFRICA) regarding the harmonisation of food laws in the CCAFRICA Region. The Side Event was an excellent opportunity to foster intra and inter-regional collaboration, cooperation and dialogue on food safety and SPS matters and to share expertise and experiences, exchange ideas and learn from best practices in order to address the challenges faced by Africa in the SPS and food safety areas. Furthermore, the Side Event provided an opportunity to consider practical options for continuing these exchanges.

Her Excellency Dr Agnes Kalibata, UN Special Envoy to the Food Systems Summit (UNFSS21) officially opened the Side Event. Dr Kalibata recalled the objective of the UNFSS21, which is to raise global awareness and achieve global commitments and actions that transform food systems to resolve hunger, reduce diet-related disease and heal the planet. Dr Kalibata welcomed the timely Side Event in the context of the AfCFTA, which is expected to increase intra-African trade by 52%. Noting the linkages between the Side Event and the UNFSS21, Dr Kalibata drew attention to *Action Track 1: Ensure access to safe and nutritious food for all* as well as *Action Track 2: Shift to sustainable consumption patterns* of the UNFSS21. She indicated that ensuring compliance with food safety and SPS requirements was critical to the food trade at the domestic as well as the intra-African and international markets. Dr Kalibata also referred to *Action Track 3: Boost nature-positive production*, *Action Track 4: Advance equitable livelihoods* and *Action Track 5: Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress* and she emphasised the fact that there was a need for collective action to transform the way the world produces, processes and consumes food.

The Side Event, moderated by Mrs Awilo Ochieng Pernet, then proceeded with a series of presentations given by a Panel of experts who discussed various issues related to compliance with food safety standards and SPS requirements, foodborne diseases and public health, food trade, risk analysis and harmonisation of food laws, among others. Participants had the opportunity to make comments and raise questions using the Chat function. The schedule of the presentations was as follows:

1. Setting the scene – Overview: Mrs Awilo Ochieng Pernet, Former Chairperson FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission
2. State of play of the AfCFTA, Implementation of the African Union sanitary and phytosanitary policy framework: Mr Godfrey Bahiigwa, Director, Department for Agriculture, Rural Development Blue Economy and Sustainable Environment, African Union Commission

1. The role of Codex and development of guidelines for supporting the elaboration of harmonised food laws for the CCAFRICA Region: Mr Maritim Kimutai, Former Chairperson FAO/WHO Regional Coordinating Committee for Africa (CCAFRICA)
2. Assessing and strengthening national food control systems in Africa: FAO's perspective: Mrs Catherine Bessy and Mr Blaise Ouattara, Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO)
3. The experience of the European Union in harmonisation of food law: Mrs Nathalie Chaze, Director, Food Sustainability and International Relations, Directorate General for Health and Food Safety, European Commission
4. Opportunities to leverage existing data and expertise, information sharing and regulatory collaboration based on Codex standards: Mrs Mary Frances Lowe, Codex Manager, United States of America
5. Principles and Guidelines for National Food Control Systems (CXG 82-2013): Mrs Nicola Hinder, First Assistant Secretary, Export and Veterinary Services Division, Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment, Australia
6. The adoption of the World Health Assembly Resolution on food safety and beyond: Mr Francesco Branca, Director, Department of Nutrition and Food Safety, World Health Organisation (WHO)

The presentations were followed by a «Questions and Answers» segment and the moderator gave a summary of the discussions including the recommendations.

Mrs Sandrine Gaudin, Secrétaire générale, Secrétariat Général des Affaires Européennes, Bureau du Premier Ministre gave the Concluding Remarks in which she highlighted the following key messages:

- Food security is a universal need shared by all countries. Therefore, ensuring food safety and food security is a common responsibility.
- International collaboration and dialogue is extremely important to strengthen cooperation among countries and to enable them to work together. It is thus important to ensure a fair linguistic representation.
- Regulations play an essential role to achieve food safety and to address its challenges.
- The crucial role played by the Codex Alimentarius Commission should be fully recognised and supported, including in the context of the UNFSS21.
- There would be a follow-up Side Event on the margins of the 33rd Session of the CCGP in 2022.

SUMMARY

- It was recalled that the core mandate of the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission is to develop internationally harmonised food safety, food quality and nutrition standards and related texts to protect the health of consumers and ensure fair practices in the food trade.
- Food safety is a prerequisite for health, food security and nutrition, and trade in safe food leads to wealth creation. Therefore, compliance with food safety and SPS requirements contributes towards the achievement of several SDGs, including SDG 1: No poverty; SDG 2: Zero hunger; SDG 3: Good health and well-being; SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth; SDG 12: Responsible consumption and production and SDG 17: Partnerships for the goals. Ensuring food safety thus leads to inclusive health, wealth and socio-economic development.
- The tremendous global challenges resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic were highlighted and attention was drawn to the Policy Brief published by the United Nations on «The Impact of COVID-19 on Food Security and Nutrition» as well as the guidance documents published by FAO, WHO, the Codex Alimentarius Commission and other relevant international organisations regarding Covid-19 and food safety, food security and nutrition. It was noted that the COVID-19 pandemic had highlighted weaknesses in food control and certification systems and in this context, the implementation of Codex standards and guidelines played an important role.

- It was recognised that foodborne diseases (FBD) contribute significantly to the global burden of disease and mortality, especially in developing countries. According to WHO, 600 million people fall ill following the consumption of contaminated food and there are 420'000 FBD-related deaths annually.

- It was further acknowledged that FBD also have a negative impact on public health and on socio-economic development. Reference was made to a study by the World Bank, in which it is estimated that FBD cost US$ 110 Billion per year in low- and middle-income countries in lost productivity and medical expenses.

- The forthcoming Codex 60th Anniversary 1963-2023 was highlighted as it presents a tremendous opportunity for Codex Members and Observers to undertake initiatives and activities to promote Codex standards and food safety at local, national, regional and global levels.

- The AfCFTA, a legal instrument which brings together all the 55 African Union Member States to create a single market of more than 1.2 billion people was presented. The AfCFTA aims at promoting industrial development through diversification and regional value chain development, agricultural development and food security. The AfCFTA will create new market opportunities for SMEs. However, it was emphasised that compliance with food safety and SPS requirements in the regional food trade would be critical to achieve this goal. Furthermore, it was acknowledged that the process would not be easy as there were several SPS challenges, which had to be addressed. These include among others, limited enforcement capacity, limited resources, limited data sharing, etc. It was recalled that the African Union SPS Policy Framework was the foundation for protecting domestic consumers' health, ensuring safe trade, promoting sustainable agricultural systems, creating jobs and economic prosperity within the AfCFTA. It was further indicated that the African Union SPS Policy Framework is the main tool for implementing Annex VII of the AfCFTA on SPS issues.

- The strong linkage between the African Union SPS Policy Framework and CCAFRICA's initiative to develop guidelines to support the elaboration of harmonised food laws was emphasised. Harmonised food laws would further facilitate intra-African trade and they would also enable SMEs to have better market access by complying with food safety and SPS requirements. The Proposed Draft Guidelines will be circulated for comments at Step 3 and subsequently examined at the 24th Session of CCAFRICA in 2022.

- The importance of effective national food control systems was emphasised as these play a pivotal role in protecting the health of consumers and ensuring fair practices in the food trade. The FAO/WHO Food Control System Assessment Tool provides a harmonised and objective basis to analyse performance of national food control systems and foster a national consensus about the way forward. It was specified that the Assessment Tool is anchored on Codex principles and internationally recognised good practices and guidelines and that it could contribute towards harmonisation of SPS standards in Africa. It was further indicated that it could also serve as a common instrument for analysing food control systems and that it could be used by countries as a supporting basis for self-assessment to identify priority areas of improvement and plan sequential and coordinated capacity development activities.

- The European Commission shared its experience in the harmonisation of EU food law, which includes the development of a single market for food and feed. It was noted that the creation of a single EU market had led to important benefits and it had contributed to ensuring a high-level of food safety for 446 million EU consumers. Furthermore, it was stated that the EU experience could be useful for the African Union in its current harmonisation efforts in the context of the AfCFTA with a view to facilitating intra-regional trade and to developing a single market. It was highlighted that the harmonisation of EU food law had been a gradual process following the recognition of the need for an integrated approach to food safety thereby leading to the adoption of the General Food Law Regulation, which set out an overarching and coherent framework for the development of food and feed legislation in the EU. Through years of EU policymaking, the EU system had achieved its objective to deliver food that it is safe, plentiful, nutritious and of high quality. It was emphasised that food safety remains a priority for the EU together with the need to work further on sustainability, to widen actions to reach a sustainable future and a sustainable food system.

In this regard, it was noted that under the Farm to Fork Strategy, the European Commission had, amongst others, committed to preparing a proposal for a legislative framework on sustainable food systems by the end of 2023, following broad consultations and impact assessments. The EU reaffirmed its commitment to support Africa in the SPS area.

- It was acknowledged that it was important for Africa to participate actively and effectively in Codex standard-setting activities as well as other multilateral food safety-related work e.g. on the World Health Assembly Resolution on food safety. The role of Africa as a key user and contributor to Codex work was highlighted and it was indicated that there were opportunities for Africa to leverage existing data and expertise, information sharing and regulatory collaboration. Examples of resources and other collaborative programmes that strengthen food safety and international partnerships were indicated. It was noted that these collaborations, including the development of Codex standards to meet the needs of consumers and producers in Africa, would help ensure food safety and fair practices in the food trade while keeping the context appropriate to Africa. Various resources and opportunities were presented. These include bilateral as well as regional and multilateral partnerships such as with the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission, FAO, WHO, the FAO/WHO Codex Trust Fund, the Standards and Trade Development Facility (STDF), the World Trade Organisation Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS-Committee), etc. Specific training events and capacity building tools that support the development of flexible and risk-based regulatory systems to facilitate inter-regional and intra-regional trade in food were also presented.

- The great relevance of the work of the Codex Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems (CCFICS) on National Food Control Systems was emphasised. Reference was made to the CCFICS *Principles and Guidelines of National Food Control Systems*, which were considered to be of importance to the work being undertaken by the African Union to harmonise its food laws and develop or update risk-based food control systems. The CCFICS Principles and Guidelines provide practical guidance to assist national governments, and their competent authorities in the design, development, operation, evaluation and improvement of the national food control system. There are 13 principles for a national food control system, including transparency; clearly defined roles and responsibilities; use of risk-based, science-based and evidence-based decision making; cooperation and coordination between multiple competent authorities; recognition of other systems (including equivalence); and harmonisation with Codex. It was emphasised that the recommended framework to implement a national food control system was made up of the following elements: policy setting, system design, implementation, monitoring and system review, and continuous improvement.

- The WHO food safety related activities were highlighted and in particular, attention was drawn to the 73rd World Health Assembly Resolution (WHA73.5) on «Strengthening efforts on food safety». It was indicated that WHA73.5 calls on the Director General of WHO to update, in coordination with FAO, and in consultation with Member States and OIE, the WHO Global strategy for food safety in order to address current and emerging challenges, incorporate new technologies and include innovative strategies for strengthening food safety systems. WHO has established a Technical Advisory Group (TAG) to advise the Organisation on the new WHO Global Strategy for Food Safety. The first meeting of the TAG was held virtually from 8th to 10th February 2021 and it would be followed by consultations with WHO Member States, partners and the public. Furthermore, it was highlighted that the new WHO Global Strategy would have a core focus on strengthening national food safety and food control systems by considering all components and prioritising specific actions that are likely to have the greatest impact on reducing the burden of FBD.a

RECOMMENDATIONS AND WAY FORWARD

- CCAFRICA and the African Union should take advantage of the showcased opportunities to increase intra-regional and inter-regional collaboration and cooperation and leverage resources in order to achieve the food safety and SPS-related goals of the AfCFTA;
- Harmonisation of national food laws with Codex standards is important and CCAFRICA Members are called upon to continue engaging effectively in Codex work;
- Codex Members and Observers as well as relevant regional and international organisations are invited to collaborate with CCAFRICA to develop and roll out a Road Map for harmonising food safety policy and food laws in Africa;
- Strong support for the implementation of the African Union SPS Policy Framework should be mobilised through high-level advocacy at regional and international events, including during CCAFRICA and other relevant Codex sessions;
- Codex Members and Observers should highlight the importance of food safety and Codex in achieving the UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.
- Codex Members and Observers should participate actively in the ongoing discussions in view of the UNFSS21 including the five Action Tracks as well as the Dialogues;
- Codex Members and Observers should contribute towards the development of the WHO and FAO strategies on food safety by participating actively in the consultation process of these texts.