MENTORING PROGRAMME LEADS TO NEW GUIDELINES TO CONTROL FOODBORNE DISEASES

WORKING FOR the world's food producers and consumers

WORKING TO develop guidelines to help countries control food-borne diseases

WORKING WITH World Health Organization

WORKING THANKS TO USA, France, Japan, Switzerland, Australia, Italy and other resource partners

As production systems change and the food chain lengthens to meet the needs of a globalized industry, the potential for contamination at different points along that chain also changes. To address this, the Codex Alimentarius Commission in 2009 began updating its guidelines for establishing and implementing criteria to help ensure the microbiological safety of foods. These efforts quickly reached an impasse, however. Many countries, especially developing ones, felt unsure about the technical aspects and questioned how the guidelines would affect their food and trade sectors. In response, and with the support of FAO staff, Codex established a novel mentoring programme, setting up teams through which experienced country mentors worked with less-experienced mentees to simplify the setting of safety criteria. As a result, new guidelines were finalized by the Codex Committee on Food Hygiene in November 2012.

Each year, millions of people endure food-borne illnesses, from *Salmonella* in dried spices to *E. coli* in meat. These hazards lead to both acute and chronic illnesses in those affected, as well as billions of dollars in medical expenses, lost productivity, recalled food and markets losses. The United States of America alone estimates that one in six of its citizens suffers from foodborne disease annually, adding up to over USD 35 billion in costs. In Australia, it is one in four citizens, and a cost of A$1.2 billion annually. While no estimates are available for developing countries, it is assumed that their rates are at least as high, if not higher.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC), the UN organization that sets the world's food safety and quality standards, provides guidelines to aid countries in setting national standards and regulations that deal with, among others, microbiological contamination. In 2009, recognizing the impact of globalization of the food supply and the increased complexity of the food chain on produce safety, Codex set about updating its microbiological criteria guidelines. The aim was to meet the new realities surrounding food production and trade, and to take advantage of newly available risk-assessment approaches. Traditionally, food-control standards called for end-product testing – if a batch of food tested positive for contamination, it was withheld from marketing. If negative, it was considered safe for consumers. But this strategy only tested a small portion of the food heading to market. Today, modern food-safety management places importance on implementing control

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measures all along the chain and on establishing criteria at different points in that chain. This not only catches problems earlier, it monitors whether the control efforts are working *in situ* or if corrective actions are needed.

Yet, after three years, little progress had been made because many countries, especially developing ones, had difficulty understanding the new approaches and their practical applications. They were concerned that they lacked expertise or appropriate background data to establish and implement the new microbiological criteria. So when the Codex Committee on Food Hygiene (CCFH) suggested a mentoring programme to break down the complex issues into more comprehensible elements – with developed-country mentors sharing their knowledge through teams – the idea was immediately recognized for its merit.

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SHARING KNOWLEDGE TO OVERCOME HURDLES

With FAO's support, Codex set up seven teams, each focusing on a different potential hazard or commodity. The individual teams, which included an experienced mentor along with mentees from several less-experienced countries, met through virtual means for a year, honing their practical cases to inform the new guidelines. FAO staff facilitated the process by providing support on any communication, procedural or technical issues that arose as the participants worked together across different time zones and languages.

For the mentees, this had positive results on several levels. The mentoring process provided a valuable learning experience that heightened their understanding of, and ability to work with, a complex subject. When all the teams gathered for a working group meeting in Parma, Italy, in May 2012, they were able to share their knowledge, data and learning experiences with members of the other teams and to meet key national experts, which enabled them to set up future exchanges. For example, in order to strengthen its knowledge in risk analysis for the poultry sector, Colombia can draw on the relationship with its mentor, Denmark, to increase its understanding, use and application of microbiological criteria, and support the ongoing risk-assessment process.

INCREASED KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS LEADS TO NEW STANDARDS

Codex has always dealt with microbiological criteria through guidelines rather than strict food standards, in order to allow countries the flexibility of adapting or adopting the guidelines that best fit their food systems. When drafting the guidelines, care was taken to ensure that the concepts explored and elaborated by the teams were factored in. Thus, when the guidelines were presented to the CCFH in November 2012, developing countries recognized that their voices were also a part of the document, and after three years of delay, the Committee agreed on the guidelines and sent them to the CAC for final adoption in July 2013. These guidelines will inform approaches taken at national level on the use of microbiological criteria in food-safety management, supporting national efforts to ensure safety and, thus, contribute to the control of foodborne illnesses.