

# Technical report of the subregional workshop on rapid exchange of information during food safety emergencies in central Asia

Almaty, Kazakhstan, 24–25 May 2023



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## Abstract

This report emphasizes the crucial role of countries in identifying and responding to global public health risks associated with food safety incidents, as mandated by the International Health Regulations (IHR). Central Asian countries (CAC) have experienced significant economic shifts in the last two decades, leading to reduced dependence on domestic agriculture and increased reliance on food imports. This shift towards globalization highlights the necessity for robust food safety measures, including active engagement in networks like the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN). In response to this, WHO in cooperation with FAO and the INFOSAN Secretariat organized a sub-regional workshop for central Asian countries, focusing on enhancing rapid exchange of food safety information through INFOSAN using the One Health approach. The workshop convened national IHR focal points, INFOSAN emergency contact points, INFOSAN focal points, and other representatives from food safety authorities involved in handling food safety emergencies in the central Asian countries. Technical experts from WHO, FAO and the INFOSAN Secretariat provided comprehensive two-day training sessions, followed by reports from central Asian countries detailing their approaches to exchanging food safety information. This was complemented by plenary and group discussions aimed at reviewing barriers, generating recommendations and practical strategies to strengthen participation in INFOSAN.

## Keywords

FOOD SAFETY  
INTERNATIONAL HEALTH REGULATIONS (IHR)  
ONE HEALTH

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## Background

In the past two decades, central Asian countries have undergone significant transformations in their economic structure, trade patterns and policies. The importance of agriculture as a livelihood in rural areas has diminished, and there has been a notable increase in food imports to meet the subregion's consumption needs. However, the rise of international trade and the globalization of the food chain have brought about changes in food safety risk management, highlighting the need for effective mechanisms to respond to food safety incidents and emergencies. This includes the capacity to actively participate in food safety risk communication and exchange information through international systems and networks like the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN).

One of the core capacities required by the International Health Regulations (IHR) (2005) is the capacity to detect and respond to food safety events that may pose an international public health threat. This entails having established and operational mechanisms for managing and responding to food safety emergencies.

Food safety incidents and emergencies can arise from various domestic and international sources. A multidisciplinary approach – involving all relevant sectors and stakeholders, along with effective communication between national food safety authorities in countries that import and/or export food commodities – is therefore crucial for an effective response. This requires well-established and tested traceability and recall systems, efficient food safety communication channels (including active participation in INFOSAN) and robust systems for public health and food safety emergency preparedness, detection and response.

Joint external evaluations – a voluntary, collaborative, multisectoral process to assess country capacities as part of the IHR (2005) Monitoring and Evaluation Framework – conducted in central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) have highlighted the need to strengthen food safety incident and emergency response systems, including risk communication and participation in INFOSAN. This requires activation of INFOSAN emergency contact points, enhanced understanding of the features of the Network and how it works, clarification of roles and responsibilities, and clear linkages between INFOSAN emergency contact points and national IHR focal points.

## The workshop

The purpose of the workshop was to strengthen the capacity of countries in central Asia to rapidly exchange information during food safety emergencies using INFOSAN and the One Health approach. The specific objectives were to:

- strengthen understanding of INFOSAN, and how it can be used to facilitate the exchange of food safety information;
- provide hands-on guidance on the use of the INFOSAN Community Website as a platform for sharing food safety information;
- test the effectiveness and efficiency of country mechanisms for responding to food safety emergencies, including their capacity to interact with INFOSAN;
- provide recommendations for strengthening the rapid exchange of information during food safety emergencies in central Asian countries; and
- strengthen bonds between sectors and stakeholders involved in food safety within and among central Asian countries by operationalizing the One Health concept.

Workshop participants included national IHR focal points, INFOSAN emergency contact points, INFOSAN focal points and other representatives of food safety authorities involved in work on food safety emergencies from the five countries in central Asia: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

Staff from WHO headquarters (INFOSAN Secretariat), the WHO Regional Office for Europe, the WHO Country Office in Kazakhstan and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Regional Office for Europe and central Asia co-facilitated the workshop. National professional officers and One Health catalysts from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan also attended and supported their respective country delegations.

## Day 1 of the workshop

### Welcome and opening remarks



**On behalf of the host country,** Ainagul Kuatbayeva (National IHR Coordinator and Director, Scientific Centre for Hygiene and Epidemiology, National Centre for Public Health, Ministry of Health, Kazakhstan) opened the workshop. She warmly welcomed participants and highlighted the relevance of WHO's tools in promoting the exchange of information during food safety events. Ms Kuatbayeva emphasized the crucial connection between environmental health and food safety, and acknowledged the significance of INFOSAN in facilitating rapid communication during food safety events. She also expressed gratitude to WHO and FAO for their efforts to facilitate swift communication during such events.

**On behalf of WHO,** Peter Sousa Hoejskov (Technical Officer, Food Safety and Zoonotic Diseases, WHO Regional Office for Europe) welcomed workshop participants. Drawing attention to the scale of the agriculture sector and the prevalence of traditional food practices in central Asia, Mr Hoejskov emphasized the importance of food safety and rapid communication to prevent and control food safety events and foodborne disease outbreaks. He highlighted that rapid exchange of information enables a prompt response and enhances multisectoral coordination.



Acknowledging the diverse backgrounds of the participants, Mr Hoejskov said that INFOSAN could play a vital role in facilitating communication among authorities with a stake in food safety. He outlined the objectives of INFOSAN and encouraged participants to engage with the speakers, stressing the importance of collaboration to improve food safety in the subregion.

**On behalf of FAO** in Kazakhstan, Gokce Akbalik (Food Safety Consultant, FAO Regional Office for Europe and central Asia) took the opportunity to welcome participants. Ms Akbalik emphasized the importance of continuously developing food control systems to be able to respond rapidly to the changing context of food chain risks, noting that that required multisectoral collaboration and communication by public authorities, food businesses, academia and international organizations at the national and international levels. She expressed confidence that the workshop would provide valuable insights on how to facilitate effective communication in the event of a food safety incident, underscoring the essential communication role played by food safety authorities.



## Background and introduction to the workshop

Raul Garcia Acevedo (Technical Officer, INFOSAN Secretariat, WHO Headquarters) provided background information and an introduction to the workshop, including its objectives and an overview of the agenda. Participants then introduced themselves and a group photo was taken.

## Technical training sessions

### Emerging food safety issues in the WHO European Region with a specific focus on central Asia

*Gokce Akbalik, Food Safety Consultant,  
FAO Regional Office for Europe and central Asia*

During the presentation, Ms Akbalik discussed the challenges in the food chain and stressed the need for a systemic approach to address them effectively. Indeed, adopting a food systems approach would be crucial to ensure access to healthy and nutritious food for everyone, always. Food safety was identified as a pivotal component, requiring compliance with standards for safe consumption.

In the global food safety context, changes in consumer preferences and awareness, environmental factors, the globalization of the food trade, and new technologies provide opportunities while introducing complexities. Climate change has significant implications for food safety, as in the case of algal blooms and mycotoxins, for example. New food sources and food production systems offered by technological innovations represent promising opportunities, but require careful assessment of food safety aspects, and may have regulatory implications. The collaborative efforts of WHO and FAO in assessing emerging food risks will be crucial to ensure safety. Global developments must also be monitored as part of efforts to tackle these multifaceted concerns, while a One Health perspective is necessary to allow a holistic understanding and coordinated response to food safety challenges.

Priority issues for countries in Europe and central Asia include improving food control systems by revising and updating food laws and regulations in line with international trade requirements, and ensuring effective enforcement at the national level, with the coordination of roles and responsibilities among competent authorities.

In order to guarantee a rapid and effective response to food incidents, food control functions need to be enhanced through risk-based approaches, the digitalization of processes, traceability and improved laboratory capabilities. Addressing the lack of understanding and technical capacities among food businesses is another urgent area for action, while countries also need to improve capacities relating to the identification and reporting of foodborne illnesses.

FAO and WHO recommend working with diverse actors, both within and outside government bodies, to promote collective responsibility for food safety. An evidence-based approach, grounded in scientific research and data, is crucial for informed decision-making, while raising awareness about food safety and leveraging new technologies are also critical objectives. Knowledge sharing and experience exchange among stakeholders are also essential for advancing food safety practices.

### Components and functions of food safety emergency investigation and response systems

*Peter Sousa Hoejskov, Technical Officer, Food Safety and Zoonotic Diseases, WHO Regional Office for Europe*

In his presentation, Mr Hoejskov defined a food safety emergency as “a situation, whether accidental or intentional, that is identified by a competent authority as constituting a serious and as-yet uncontrolled foodborne risk to public health that requires urgent action”. He then outlined the characteristics of food safety emergencies and explained how the response might be scaled from “business as usual” to “crisis mode”.

A detailed description was given of the essential components of food safety emergency response systems, namely (1) data and information; (2) risk communication and public advice; (3) procedures, standard operating procedures and protocols; (4) legal basis; (5) risk-based food inspection and enforcement; (6) laboratory capacity (7) multisectoral coordination; and (8) monitoring and evaluation.

The presentation highlighted the importance of preparedness and planning for food safety emergencies, which should involve stakeholders from across the entire food chain. It also described in detail the steps to be taken in the investigation and response to food safety emergencies, including the decision on setting up an emergency response team, epidemiological investigation, food and environment investigation, and traceback investigations and food recalls.

Lastly, Mr Hoejskov highlighted the fact that communication, including risk communication, was an essential function throughout the emergency response process. Indeed, appropriate communication could help reduce the impact of emergencies and lower the risk of inappropriate action by the public or food businesses.



## Communication during food safety emergencies – principles and country examples

*Gokce Akbalik, Food Safety Consultant,  
FAO Regional Office for Europe and central Asia*

Building on her previous presentation, Ms Akbalik stressed that effective risk communication – especially in emergencies – required good preparation according to globally accepted principles. Preparedness plans should be developed in alignment with the FAO/WHO framework, starting with work to secure high-level support and identify key partners. Plans should include five essential elements: information collection, incident identification, incident management, post-incident review and risk communication. The FAO Regional Office for Europe and central Asia had worked with multisectoral coordination groups in Azerbaijan, the Republic of Moldova, and Türkiye to develop food safety emergency response and communication plans.

Recalling that national authorities were responsible for developing coordinated communication protocols during food safety emergencies, Ms Akbalik stressed that – even where there were time constraints – effective communication was crucial to address the questions that might arise from various sources. Openness, responsiveness, timeliness and transparency were the key elements of effective communication; it was also vital to understand different audiences, such as industry, the public and international partners, and consider the essential information they needed to know. Different information channels should be used to reach different audiences, for example social media, producer networks or printed publications. WHO and FAO had developed guidelines on food safety communication based on international best practice to support countries during emergencies.



## Reports from the central Asian countries

### Food safety emergency response systems in central Asia – communication within the subregion and beyond

#### Kazakhstan

*Zeynulla Sharipov, INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point in Kazakhstan and Specialist, National Centre of Expertise, Committee of Sanitary and Epidemiological Control, Ministry of Health*

The primary responsibility for food safety lies with business entities, as mandated by legislation in Kazakhstan. Regional and international cooperation on risks and threats is facilitated through the World Trade Organization (WTO) Secretariat, the Information Centre on Technical Barriers to Trade, Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures, and the INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point in Kazakhstan.

Interaction and coordination during emergencies primarily takes place between authorized committees of the Ministry of Healthcare, Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Trade and Integration. The Concept for the Development of Healthcare until 2026 aims to enhance existing communication mechanisms through the use of websites and mobile applications, and ensure operational interaction. Efforts are under way to improve the risk management system, introduce early warning and response programmes, upgrade the laboratory service and train and certify personnel.

International communication is conducted through the Ministry of Trade and Integration, which interacts with the WTO and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The responsible committees of the Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Health share information with the Ministry of Trade and Integration about legal acts, drafts, notices and notifications.

Mr Sharipov provided an example of the response to an anthrax outbreak in the Karaganda region in 2016. The Health Department, the territorial subdivision of the Committee of Sanitary and Epidemiological Control of the Ministry of Health, and the local veterinary division took anti-epidemic, sanitary and preventive measures, while a task force and commission were established to coordinate the seizure and destruction of animals, products and raw materials posing a risk to animal and human health.

#### Kyrgyzstan

*Azamat Imakeev, INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point in Kyrgyzstan and Head, Department for Supervision of Food Safety, Department for Disease Prevention and State Sanitary and Epidemiological Surveillance, Ministry of Health*

Despite its obligations under national and international regulations, Kyrgyzstan does not currently have specific legal regulations in place for responding to food safety emergencies.

Kyrgyzstan plans to expand the existing Public Health Emergency Response Operations Centre, which is responsible for addressing emergency situations.

The Ministry of Health has revised its order on food poisoning and the identification of causative agents. Workshops in collaboration with the European Union have been organized to enhance preparedness for mass gatherings, with a focus on food, water and chemical safety. These efforts will be integrated into the work of the Public Health Emergency Response Operations Centre to ensure a comprehensive approach to emergency response.

In recognition of the fact that an efficient response to emergencies requires coordination and effective communication among stakeholders, a coordination council on health care, comprising members from ministries and relevant agencies, has been established to facilitate communication. However, there is a need for a clear interaction mechanism specifically tailored to food safety emergencies.

Kyrgyzstan has piloted an automated system for epidemiological surveillance in line with EAEU guidelines. This system monitors infectious diseases, morbidity rates and incidents of food poisoning on a regular basis.

Mr Imakeev provided an example of the response to an incident involving contaminated sushi. *Salmonella* Enteritidis was detected in the raw salmon that had caused a significant food poisoning outbreak affecting over 350 individuals. Prompt action was taken within the country, including investigations by the veterinary and public health services. However, neighbouring countries were not informed of the outbreak, indicating a need for improved communication and collaboration in cross-border food safety emergencies.

## Tajikistan

*Olimdzhon Khalimov, INFOSAN Emergency Focal Point in Tajikistan and Technical Specialist, State Sanitary Epidemiological Surveillance Service, Ministry of Health and Social Protection*

Tajikistan is planning to guarantee the rights of individuals and legal entities to purchase safe, high-quality food products by taking legislative measures to regulate the procurement, production, transportation, storage and sale of food products, materials and products. Other laws, such as those related to veterinary medicine, consumer protection, health and emergencies, will also be revised as needed.

At the government level, Tajikistan has a food safety council comprising deputies from various ministries and agencies, led by the Deputy Prime Minister. This council convenes extraordinary meetings to coordinate intersectoral action when necessary.

Tajikistan imports food products from various countries, including Belarus, Brazil, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Kazakhstan, Pakistan, the Russian Federation, Sweden, Ukraine, the United Arab Emirates, the United States of America, and Uzbekistan. It exports food products to Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, and some European countries.

Foodborne diseases are a recurring issue in Tajikistan, primarily due to the lack of awareness of consumers about the processing rules and precautions to take when using and consuming food. There is a need to enhance the surveillance system in the country, monitor public catering networks and improve compliance with sanitary

standards throughout the food supply chain. Training programmes should be provided for managers and personnel involved in catering, trade and services to ensure adherence to sanitary standards. Local authorities, administrations, relevant institutions, enterprises and the media (newspapers, radio and television) should also be involved in disseminating information about risks and preventive measures.

## Turkmenistan

*Ashyrmurat Gylyjov, Head, Public Health and Nutrition Centre,  
State Sanitary and Epidemiological Service,  
Ministry of Health and Medical Industry*

It is the role of the Cabinet of Ministers and local governance in Turkmenistan to manage food safety through policy creation and regulatory frameworks. Outreach initiatives are run in collaboration with local government to safeguard the well-being of the population.

A robust coordination framework and communication mechanism has been established in the country to prevent the spread of zoonotic diseases. The framework includes epidemiological supervision and engages stakeholders from relevant sectors.

Turkmenistan has an ISO 17025-accredited laboratory, which conducts research on the safety of food and contact materials.

To promote regional cooperation, Turkmenistan prioritizes information sharing with neighbouring countries. A system for sharing relevant information has been established, fostering transparency and collaborative efforts to address common food safety challenges.

Turkmenistan has implemented a comprehensive monitoring and surveillance system to ensure food safety nationwide. Data related to foodborne illnesses, outbreaks and other incidents are collected and analysed using a standardized reporting form.



Mr Gylyjov stressed the strong overall commitment of Turkmenistan to maintaining food safety through effective governance, coordination, laboratory facilities, regional cooperation and comprehensive monitoring.

## Uzbekistan

*Mavlyuda Shamsutdinova, INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point in Uzbekistan and Head, Laboratory of Sanitation and Hygiene, Committee for Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare and Public Health, Ministry of Health*

In response to lessons learned regarding emergency preparedness from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic in 2021, the Centre for Emergency Response in Public Health was established. Led by high-ranking government officials, the Centre is responsible for coordinating and managing emergency situations. Laws and regulations specifically addressing emergency response and management were also introduced as part of this initiative.

In 2022, a joint external evaluation was conducted to evaluate compliance with the International Health Regulations (2005). The assessment covered 19 items, including the national regulatory framework and biosecurity measures, and led to the development of an action plan to address gaps and improve compliance. Efforts are currently under way to achieve a score of level 3, with the ultimate aim of reaching level 4, which indicates a high preparedness and response capacity. In terms of specific action taken, the instructions regarding food poisoning incidents have been revised to align them with the requirements of the International Health Regulations (2005), while hygiene standards have also been reviewed and updated accordingly.

Laws and regulations are in place to regulate laboratories involved in food safety, notably requiring them to undergo national certification and accreditation processes to ensure their competence and reliability based on the standards of Uzbekistan's regulatory body. These regulations contribute to the overall quality and accuracy of laboratory testing, in turn strengthening the capacity to assure food safety standards.



## Technical training sessions (continued)

### Operationalizing One Health to address food safety issues in central Asia – One Health Joint Plan of Action, Roadmap for Health and Well-being in central Asia (2022–2025) and other One Health initiatives

Peter Sousa Hoejskov, Technical Officer, Food Safety and Zoonotic Diseases, WHO Regional Office for Europe

Mr Hoejskov started by highlighting the fact that many of today's health threats – including food safety threats – require multisectoral responses. The One Health approach has proven to be effective in addressing complex health issues originating at the human–animal–environment interface. One Health is defined as an integrated, unifying approach that aims to sustainably balance and optimize the health of people, animals and ecosystems. It recognizes that the health of humans, domestic and wild animals, plants and the wider environment (including ecosystems) are closely linked and interdependent. The approach mobilizes multiple sectors, disciplines and communities at varying levels of society to work together to foster well-being and tackle threats to health and ecosystems, while addressing the collective need for clean water, energy and air, safe and nutritious food; acting on climate change; and contributing to sustainable development.

During his presentation, Mr Hoejskov highlighted recent developments at the global and regional levels to operationalize the One Health approach. These include the global One Health Joint Plan of Action (2022–2026) – drawn up by the FAO, United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), World Organization for Animal Health (WOAH) and WHO Quadripartite – and the draft guide to its operationalization, which are useful tools to guide action at the country level, and the Regional One Health Coordination Mechanism and its joint workplan. The workplan contains activities to reduce antimicrobial resistance; improve multisectoral coordination to address zoonotic diseases; strengthen awareness and understanding of the One Health approach; and improve coordination among the Quadripartite organizations and other partners.



Examples were also provided of joint work by the Quadripartite at the country and subregional levels, including collaboration with the World Bank on the One Health Initiative for central Asia. The work of the WHO Regional Office for Europe to operationalize the One Health approach was briefly described, covering the *Roadmap for Health and Well-being in central Asia (2022–2025)*<sup>1</sup> and the development of the operational framework for One Health in the WHO European Region, which will be presented for endorsement by the Regional Committee in 2024. Countries in central Asia were encouraged to actively engage in the development of the operational framework when the consultation with Member States was launched.

<sup>1</sup> Roadmap for health and well-being in Central Asia (2022–2025). Copenhagen: WHO Regional Office for Europe; 2022.

## International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) – a global mechanism for information sharing

Raul Garcia Acevedo, INFOSAN Secretariat

Established in 2004 by WHO and FAO, INFOSAN includes 187 WHO Member States and over 800 members. Its creation was prompted by a resolution adopted by the World Health Assembly in 2000 to enhance communication on food safety. Later, concerns raised by the World Health Assembly in 2002 about the health risks associated with food contamination led to the 2004 revision of the guidelines for information exchange during emergencies by the Codex Alimentarius Commission. Member States were advised to designate contact points for the efficient sharing of information, to be managed by WHO. INFOSAN is recognized under the International Health Regulation (2005) as the tool for international communication during food safety emergencies, aiding countries in developing core preparedness and response capacities.

The presentation described the INFOSAN membership, including INFOSAN emergency contact points and INFOSAN focal points, in addition to members' roles and responsibilities, and how they interacted with each other, the INFOSAN Secretariat and other WHO Member States.

The INFOSAN objectives, listed below, were also presented during this session.

- (a) Promote the rapid exchange of information during food safety-related events.
- (b) Share information and resources on important food safety issues of global interest.
- (c) Help countries strengthen their capacity to manage food safety emergencies.
- (d) Promote partnerships and collaboration between countries, and between networks.

The presentation concluded with an account of a multi-country outbreak of *Salmonella* Typhimurium, highlighting the role of INFOSAN in disseminating relevant information that allows mitigation measures to be implemented by WHO Member States. International collaboration and active participation in INFOSAN were also recognized as key elements that could contribute to complex investigations of foodborne disease outbreaks.



## WHO and FAO global strategies for food safety – INFOSAN's role in reaching global targets

*Rachelle El Khoury, INFOSAN Secretariat (online) and Gokce Akbalik, FAO Regional Office for Europe and central Asia*

Rachelle El Khoury from the INFOSAN Secretariat gave an online presentation on the newly adopted WHO Global Strategy for Food Safety 2022–2030. The revised Strategy aims to address current and emerging challenges by adapting to a changing world. It outlines five interconnected strategic priorities derived from a thorough situational assessment and consultation process. The Strategy envisions safe and healthy food consumption worldwide to reduce the burden of foodborne diseases.

The presentation highlighted INFOSAN's role in assisting countries to achieve global targets related to food safety capacity in the IHR State Party Self-Assessment Annual Report, notably under the indicator on multisectoral collaboration mechanisms for food safety events. INFOSAN has a comprehensive plan running until 2030 to support Member States to reach higher levels for that indicator (level 4 or higher) and enhance their response to food safety emergencies.

FAO also recently announced its Strategic Priorities for Food Safety within the FAO Strategic Framework 2022–2031, with the vision “safe food for all people at all times” and the mission “to support Members in continuing to improve food safety at all levels by providing scientific advice and strengthening their food safety capacities for more efficient, inclusive, resilient and sustainable agrifood systems”. With four strategic outcomes, FAO aims to support the intersectoral coordination of food safety governance and make an effort to integrate food safety management across all sectors of the agrifood system. It also seeks to ensure that sound scientific advice and evidence are provided as the foundation for food safety decision-making, to work with countries to strengthen national food control systems, and to promote public and private stakeholder collaboration.

## Plenary group discussion

Participants were divided into groups and asked to come up with a list of barriers to information sharing and options to overcome them.

The main barriers to information sharing during food safety emergencies identified by the participants were the lack of multilateral collaboration, the absence of a coordinating agency, and the absence of uniform international agreements. Other barriers identified included the absence of mutually recognized standard operating procedures, reluctance to share information, confidentiality concerns, the lack of specialist training, language barriers, poor internet connectivity and cultural differences.

Actions proposed to overcome these barriers included developing and implementing standard operating procedures for the joint detection and reporting of food safety events, establishing a unified platform for information sharing with a designated coordinator, promoting effective communication through regular meetings and information exchange, and providing training for laboratory specialists and other professionals involved in information sharing.

Implementation of these actions could be facilitated through technical and financial support from organizations such as WHO and FAO, and the INFOSAN Secretariat. International agreements and capacity-building activities, including training programmes, were also considered crucial to address the identified barriers.



## Day 2 of the workshop

### Technical training sessions (continued)

#### Introduction to tabletop simulation exercise

*Raul Garcia Acevedo, INFOSAN Secretariat*

During this session, Raul Garcia Acevedo introduced participants to the concept of a table-top simulation exercise to further understand and reflect on concepts and knowledge presented on Day 1. Objectives of the simulation exercise were introduced to the participants of the workshop as follows:

- (a) give participants the opportunity to work through a typical food safety event with international implications, to help them understand the roles and responsibilities of the different players connected through INFOSAN (and other regional networks);
- (b) apply the principles of risk communication throughout the evolution of a food safety incident;
- (c) demonstrate the flow of information during a food safety event with international stakeholders;
- (d) provide an opportunity for members to share their own experiences and discuss how the various situations would be addressed in their own organizational context; and
- (e) allow participants to raise questions and highlight key areas of contention to be addressed by the INFOSAN Secretariat.

Practical information concerning the exercise was also provided, including the format of the simulation exercise and further instructions to facilitate the participation of individuals.

#### Tabletop simulation exercise on communication and information sharing during a food safety emergency

*Participants*

A simulated outbreak of meningitis in the fictitious country of Abontey was presented as a starting point for the simulation exercise. The outbreak began with 15 reported cases in two districts of the country, primarily affecting elderly individuals. As the cause of the illness was unknown, rumours started to spread, causing fear within the community.

The participants were presented with questions concerning this information, leading to a discussion on whether the National Public Health Authority of Abontey should issue a public statement. The participants agreed that a statement should be issued to address the situation. They recommended including information about symptoms, precautionary measures and where to seek medical help, and stressed the importance of involving stakeholders such as the Ministry of Health, veterinary services and the local city authorities. The participants also highlighted the need to conduct epidemiological investigations and identify the transmission route.

The fictitious scenario continued with investigators being able to determine that the source of the illness was infection with *Listeria Monocytogenes*. The outbreak had expanded to 100 cases across multiple districts. In response to this update, the participants suggested working to ensure multisectoral coordination of stakeholders including the Ministry of Health, veterinary services, the local city authorities, the Ministry



of Agriculture, the Ministry of the Interior and the Ministry of Environment. It was suggested that these agencies should coordinate the outbreak response, conduct epidemiological investigations, identify contacts, isolate and hospitalize suspected patients, and determine the source and transmission route of the disease.

The participants were then provided with a new piece of information. A case-control study had revealed that 90% of the outbreak cases reported consuming specific seed and nut snack bars, with a statistically significant odds ratio. Inspection services confirmed *Listeria* contamination in the implicated snack bars. Based on these findings, the participants discussed potential next steps, including coordination with the National Food Safety Authority and the issuing of a recall notice for the implicated snack bars. They emphasized the importance of communication with other countries involved in the distribution of the products.

For the next part of the simulation exercise, the participants were informed that traceback efforts had revealed that the three companies manufacturing the snack bars had all received sesame seeds from the same broker. In addition, the broker had imported the sesame seeds from a company in a different country. One of the producers had also exported the snack bars to two other countries. Based on this information, the participants discussed the need to contact the national authorities in the country of origin of the implicated sesame seeds, and in the countries where the products had been distributed. Recognizing the international implications of the outbreak, the participants agreed that the INFOSAN Secretariat should be notified. It was decided that the INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point in Abontey would report the event, providing epidemiological details, laboratory evidence and traceback information.

The participants emphasized the importance of effective communication and information sharing with INFOSAN. They discussed the drafting of an alert by the INFOSAN Secretariat, highlighting the significance of international coordination and information sharing.

In conclusion, the simulation exercise addressed various aspects of an international food safety event, including the issuing of public statements, stakeholder involvement, epidemiological investigations, recalls and international coordination through INFOSAN. The participants stressed the need for timely communication and collaborative efforts to effectively manage this type of complex event.

## The United Kingdom's experience – emerging food safety issues in Europe and beyond (and the importance of information sharing)

*Anne Gravett, United Kingdom Food Standards Agency (online)*

Anne Gravett delivered a presentation on the United Kingdom's experience – emerging food safety issues in Europe and beyond (and the importance of information sharing). She started by providing an overview of the United Kingdom's efforts in the field of food safety and the organizational structure within the country. She then provided a concise summary of the approach adopted for managing food safety incidents and enhancing resilience, encompassing both the routine and non-routine incident management plans.

Ms Gravett continued by sharing the United Kingdom's experience with food safety following its departure from the European Union. This transformation has led to the prioritization of various areas, including the early detection of risk signals, stakeholder engagement and the expediting of information sharing through INFOSAN during cross-border incidents. She described how the United Kingdom had effectively used INFOSAN as a tool for swift information exchange during major international food safety emergencies, and highlighted its use of the Network to engage with other countries, thereby contributing to the advancement of the WHO Global Strategy for Food Safety. She also highlighted how the role of the INFOSAN Community Website had facilitated the dissemination of best practices.

In conclusion, she underscored the paramount importance of international collaboration through the International Health Regulations (2005) and INFOSAN, observing that collaboration served the common interest of ensuring a safe food supply and brought mutual benefits to all parties involved.

## The food safety emergency response system in Türkiye and how Türkiye participates in INFOSAN

*Habibe Aslan, INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point, Türkiye (online)*

Ms Aslan informed the audience that ensuring access to sufficient, safe and high-quality food and agriculture products – which were demanded by both Turkish and global markets – formed part of the vision of the Government of Türkiye for 2023. Indeed, food safety had been a priority in agricultural policy in recent decades, with significant improvements made in terms of the regulatory framework and official food controls.

During emergencies, the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry is the lead agency that activates an emergency response plan and communicates as necessary to other authorities, agencies, organizations and consumers, acting as a contact point for information requests from international partners, including INFOSAN. In the event of an incident, it works closely with the Ministry of Health, the Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of National Defence as key partners. Together, they manage incidents based on a previously established hazard characterization scale and take action accordingly. To be better prepared for emergencies, the country is currently developing a multi-agency action and communication procedure to identify and manage food safety crises in a coordinated manner.

Ms Aslan said that Türkiye actively used INFOSAN, with contact points in 81 provinces. When a notification is received, the INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point reaches out to the contact points in the provinces. An investigation then takes place according to standard operating procedures and the results are sent back to the INFOSAN Secretariat. When the multi-country outbreak of foodborne infections caused by monophasic *Salmonella* Typhimurium occurred in March 2022, the Ministry of Health and the provincial contact points were contacted. A 100% analysis for *Salmonella* was imposed on the relevant imported products for eight months, but no cases were identified.

### Introduction to the INFOSAN Community Website – practical session

*Raul Garcia acevedo, INFOSAN Secretariat*

In this session, Raul Garcia Acevedo introduced participants to the INFOSAN Community Website, a valuable platform for sharing food safety information, facilitating collaboration and promoting knowledge exchange among food safety practitioners. The presentation provided an overview of the website's features and functionalities, empowering participants to navigate and use the available resources effectively.

Through hands-on guidance, participants learned how to engage in discussions, participate in forums and share their experiences and expertise with the INFOSAN community. The session emphasized the importance of active involvement in INFOSAN, and participants were encouraged to explore the website regularly to enhance their understanding and contribute to the global food safety community.



## Group discussion – country recommendations

At the end of the workshop, participants were split into country teams and asked to identify recommendations and practical ways forward to strengthen participation in INFOSAN. The actions proposed are listed below.

### Kazakhstan

1. Create an interdepartmental coordinating council on food safety, appoint coordinators at the oblast (regional) level, and develop and approve the national coordination system.
2. Develop and implement a strategy and action plan.
3. Appoint an authorized body of the Ministry of Health to be responsible for overall coordination of food safety activities, with the participation of all relevant ministries and departments according to the action plan.

### Kyrgyzstan

1. Develop a mechanism for efficient interaction with other relevant ministries and departments (the Ministry of Agriculture, the Veterinary Service and the Ministry of Economy and Commerce), and designate INFOSAN contact points within other relevant ministries.
2. Build the capacity of the INFOSAN contact points, with technical support from WHO, FAO and the INFOSAN Secretariat.
3. Develop standard operating procedures for information sharing among the INFOSAN National Coordinator, and relevant ministries, departments and contact points.

### Tajikistan

1. Ensure that all relevant parties participate in conducting and investigating food safety cases, with coordination by the INFOSAN Contact Point.
2. Ensure that cases are reported in a timely manner through the INFOSAN Contact Point, via telephone, text or other means of communication.
3. Establish a separate entity responsible for taking measures to improve inter-agency cooperation on INFOSAN, with the involvement of veterinary control specialists.

### Turkmenistan

1. Draft and implement an action plan on improving INFOSAN cooperation in the country.
2. Organize a mechanism for interdepartmental cooperation among all relevant stakeholders involved in food safety emergency matters in the country.

### Uzbekistan

1. Maintain unified electronic monitoring of imports and exports of food products.
2. Establish coordination and information exchange mechanisms on food safety between departments.
3. Notify the Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the functioning of INFOSAN.
4. Develop a mechanism for multisectoral cooperation in the vertical structure of the country.
5. Obtain technical support from WHO for capacity-building on activities associated with INFOSAN.

## Conclusions

The workshop provided an opportunity for participants and observers to discuss options for strengthening the rapid exchange of information during food safety emergencies in central Asia. Through the tabletop simulation exercise, participants were able to reflect on current capacities to respond to food safety emergencies and rapidly share information. These reflections allowed them to propose tailored actions for implementation.

The workshop also allowed participants to gain a better understanding of how INFOSAN operates and how urgent information can be shared through the Network. It focused specifically on strengthening countries' participation in INFOSAN and promoted the use of the INFOSAN Community Website as a platform for food safety emergency notifications, networking, and the sharing of experience among sectors, countries and the international community.



## Recommended actions

To follow up on the workshop, the countries in central Asia should implement the recommended actions and practical ways forward identified to strengthen participation in INFOSAN. The recommended actions for the workshop participants are to access the INFOSAN Community Website and use the restricted-access space created for countries in central Asia to exchange food safety-related information.

The recommended actions for FAO and WHO are to provide in-country technical assistance for the implementation of recommended actions and practical ways forward to strengthen participation in INFOSAN. They were also asked to upload all workshop materials to the restricted-access space for central Asia on the INFOSAN Community Website. In addition, WHO should make the INFOSAN Community Website available in Russian to facilitate its use by members in the subregion.



## Annex 1. Workshop programme

Time	Agenda item	Resource person
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">   <b>World Health Organization</b>                      European Region                 </div> <div style="text-align: center;">   <b>Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations</b> </div> </div> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>PROGRAMME</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Subregional workshop on rapid exchange of information during food safety emergencies in central Asia</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Almaty, Kazakhstan, 24–25 May 2023</b></p>		
<b>Day 1</b>		
09:00–10:00	Welcome and opening remarks  Ainagul Mukanovna Kuatbayeva, National IHR Coordinator and Director, Scientific Centre for Hygiene and Epidemiology, National Centre for Public Health, Ministry of Health, Kazakhstan  Peter Sousa Hoejskov, Technical Officer, Food Safety and Zoonotic Diseases, WHO Regional Office for Europe  Gokce Akbalik, Food Safety Consultant, FAO Regional Office for Europe and central Asia  Background and introduction to the workshop  Introduction of participants  Group photo	Kurmanzhan Dastanbek Kyzy, WHO Kazakhstan
<b>Break</b>		
10:30–10:50	Emerging food safety issues in the WHO European Region with a specific focus on central Asia	Gokce Akbalik, FAO Regional Office for Europe and central Asia
10:50–11:10	Components and functions of food safety emergency investigation and response systems	Peter Sousa Hoejskov, WHO Regional Office for Europe
11:10–11:30	Communication during food safety emergencies – principles and country examples	Gokce Akbalik, FAO Regional Office for Europe and central Asia
11:30–12:30	Food safety emergency response systems in central Asia – communication within the subregion and beyond (10 min/country) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Kazakhstan</li> <li>- Kyrgyzstan</li> <li>- Tajikistan</li> </ul>	Participants
<b>Lunch break</b>		

Time	Agenda item	Resource person(s)
13:30–14:00	Food safety emergency response systems in central Asia – communication within the subregion and beyond (continued) (10min/country)  - Turkmenistan - Uzbekistan	Participants
14:00–14:20	Operationalizing One Health to address food safety issues in central Asia – One Health Joint Plan of Action, Roadmap for Health and Well-being in central Asia (2022–2025) and other One Health initiatives	Peter Sousa Hoejskov, WHO Regional Office for Europe
14:20–14:40	International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) – a global mechanism for information sharing	Raul Garcia Acevedo, INFOSAN Secretariat
14:40–15:00	WHO and FAO global strategies for food safety – INFOSAN’s role in reaching global targets	Rachelle El Khoury, INFOSAN Secretariat (online) and Gokce Akbalik, FAO Regional Office for Europe and central Asia
<b>Break</b>		
15:30–16:00	Group discussion: Barriers to information sharing and options to overcome them	Mixed groups
16:00–16:30	Group reporting	Mixed groups
16:30	End of day 1	
18:00	Dinner at Kazzhol Hotel	
<b>Day 2</b>		
09:00–09:10	Introduction to tabletop simulation exercise	Raul Garcia Acevedo, INFOSAN Secretariat
09:10–12:00	Tabletop simulation exercise on communication and information sharing during a food safety emergency (including coffee break)	Participants
12:00–12:30	Simulation exercise evaluation	WHO/FAO
<b>Lunch break</b>		
13:30–13:45	The United Kingdom’s experience – emerging food safety issues in Europe and beyond (and the importance of information sharing)	Anne Gravett, United Kingdom Food Standards Agency (online)
13:45–14:00	The food safety emergency response system in Türkiye and how Türkiye participates in INFOSAN	Habibe Aslan, INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point, Türkiye (online)
14:00–15:00	Introduction to the INFOSAN Community Website – practical session	Raul Garcia Acevedo, INFOSAN Secretariat
<b>Break</b>		
15:30–16:30	Group discussion – country recommendations and practical ways forward to strengthen participation in INFOSAN	Country groups
16:30–17:00	Group reporting	
17:00–17:15	Next steps, closing and certificate ceremony	WHO/FAO



## Annex 2. List of Participants

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>LIST OF PARTICIPANTS</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>Subregional workshop on rapid exchange of information during food safety emergencies in central Asia</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><b>24–25 May 2023</b></p> <p style="text-align: center;">Kazzhol Hotel, Gogol Street, 127/1, Almaty, Kazakhstan</p>			
No	Name	Position	
<b>KAZAKHSTAN</b>			
1	Gulmira Dzhanybekovna Isenova	Head, Testing Centre for Phytosanitary Laboratory Analysis, Kazakh Research Institute of Plant Protection and Quarantine	Observer
2	Nailya Maulenovna Karsybekova	National Coordinator for Codex Alimentarius, National Centre of Expertise, Committee of Sanitary and Epidemiological Control, Ministry of Health	Observer
3	Ainagul Mukanovna Kuatbayeva	National IHR Coordinator and Director, Scientific Centre for Hygiene and Epidemiology, National Centre for Public Health, Ministry of Health	Participant
4	Zeynulla Faizullaevich Sharipov	INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point in Kazakhstan and Specialist, National Centre of Expertise, Committee of Sanitary and Epidemiological Control, Ministry of Health	Participant
5	Elmira Makhsatovna Suyundikova	Sanitary Doctor, Department of Sanitary and Hygienic Monitoring, Scientific and Practical Centre for Sanitary and Epidemiological Expertise and Monitoring, National Centre for Public Health, Ministry of Health	Observer
6	Alina Serikovna Temirkhan	Chief Expert, Department of Sanitary and Hygienic Control and Supervision of Food, Education and Upbringing, Committee of Sanitary and Epidemiological Control, Ministry of Health	Participant
7	Zhanar Toktanovna Tolysbayeva	Codex Alimentarius, Department of Strategic Development and International Cooperation, National Centre of Expertise, Committee of Sanitary and Epidemiological Control, Ministry of Health	Observer
8	Elmira Seyitbekovna Utegenova	Deputy Director, Scientific and Practical Centre for Sanitary and Epidemiological Expertise and Monitoring, National Centre for Public Health, Ministry of Health	Observer
<b>KYRGYZSTAN</b>			
9	Aidana Zhyldyzbekovna Aitnazarova	Leading Specialist, Department of Public Health, Licensing of Medical and Pharmaceutical Services, Ministry of Health	Participant
10	Azamat Kypchakovich Imakeev	Head, Department for Supervision of Food Safety, Department for Disease Prevention and State Sanitary and Epidemiological Surveillance, Ministry of Health	Participant
11	Alina Kenzhebayevna Kaziyeva	Head, Division for Surveillance and Prevention of Infectious Diseases, Department for Disease Prevention and State Sanitary and Epidemiological Surveillance, Ministry of Health	Participant

<b>TAJIKISTAN</b>			
12	Zohirshoh Ishratov	Technical Specialist, State Sanitary Epidemiological Surveillance Service	Participant
13	Olimdzhon Khalimov	Technical Specialist, State Sanitary Epidemiological Surveillance Service	Participant
14	Zamir Sangov Gulmahmadzoda	Director, Centre for Quarantine Diseases	Participant
<b>TURKMENISTAN</b>			
15	Amanguly Annayev	Head, Balkan Velayat SES, State SES, Ministry of Health and Medical Industry	Participant
16	Baymuhammet Gurbannepesov	Sanitary Physician, Ahal Velayat SES, Sanitary Surveillance Department, State SES, Ministry of Health and Medical Industry	Participant
17	Ashyrmurat Gylyjov	Head, Public Health and Nutrition Centre, State Sanitary and Epidemiological Service (SES), Ministry of Health and Medical Industry	Participant
<b>UZBEKISTAN</b>			
18	Abdurakhmon Dadakhanovich Ismailov	Chief Specialist, Department of Sanitation and Hygiene, Committee for Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare and Public Health, Ministry of Health	Participant
19	Gulara Pavlanovna Rajapbayeva	Chief Specialist, Department of Especially Dangerous Infectious Diseases, Committee for Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare and Public Health, Ministry of Health	Participant
20	Mavlyuda Amanullaevna Shamsutdinova	Head, Laboratory of Sanitation and Hygiene, Committee for Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare and Public Health, Ministry of Health	Participant
<b>SECRETARIAT</b>			
21	Raul Garcia Acevedo	Technical Officer, INFOSAN Secretariat, WHO headquarters	Secretariat
22	Zulaiika Anvarbekova	One Health Catalyst, WHO Country Office, Kyrgyzstan	Secretariat
23	Habibe Aslan	INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point, 2019–2022	Keynote guest
24	Khadichamo Boymatova	WHO National Professional Officer, Country Office, Tajikistan – Control of Antimicrobial Resistance, Food Safety, Neglected Tropical Diseases	Secretariat
25	Artyom Chelpachenko	Translator	
26	Kurmanzhan Dastanbek	One Health Catalyst, WHO Country Office, Kazakhstan	Secretariat
27	Rachelle El Khoury	Technical Officer, INFOSAN Secretariat, WHO headquarters	Secretariat
28	Akbalik Gokce	Food Safety Consultant, Regional Office for Europe and central Asia, FAO	Secretariat
29	Alexey Golovkin	Translator	
30	Anne Gravett	United Kingdom Food Standards Agency	Keynote guest
31	Peter Sousa Hoejskov	Technical Officer, Food Safety and Zoonotic Diseases, WHO Regional Office for Europe	Secretariat

## Annex 3. Feedback from participants

*"I would like to note that this workshop was very useful for participants from Uzbekistan, such knowledge was acquired in the field of awareness and understanding of INFOSAN and how it can be used to facilitate the exchange of information on food safety. I was personally very much looking forward to this subregional meeting in Almaty, as it was the first meeting for me as the INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point for Uzbekistan. It was very important for me to get information on how to raise the level of "Response and management of food safety emergencies" from level 3 [received by Uzbekistan in its joint external evaluation in 2022] to level 4.*

*Based on the results of the trip, further cooperation is planned in the field of advanced training and exchange of experience between colleagues from neighbouring countries in the central Asian subregion, and we also plan to strengthen the registration systems for incidents and emergencies related to food safety, including risk communication and participation of countries in INFOSAN. The information and knowledge gained by the specialists participating in the subregional meeting in Almaty will be used to improve arrangements for the rapid exchange of information during food safety emergencies and to provide safe food to the world's population."*

Mavlyuda Shamsutdinova, Head, Laboratory of Sanitation and Hygiene, Committee for Sanitary and Epidemiological Welfare and Public Health, Ministry of Health, Uzbekistan

*"On May 24 and 25 this year, the first subregional workshop on INFOSAN for the countries of central Asia was held in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Impressions are most favourable. The seminar was held at a high level. The delegations shared their experience and lessons learned, discussed problems and possible ways to solve them, and outlined development prospects. The work of experts from the regional offices of WHO, FAO and the INFOSAN Secretariat is beyond praise! In an accessible, interesting format, the main thematic presentations were presented and simulation exercises were conducted. The experience of the United Kingdom and Türkiye was very useful for the seminar participants."*

Nailya Karsybekova, National Coordinator for Codex Alimentarius, National Centre of Expertise, Committee of Sanitary and Epidemiological Control, Ministry of Health, Kazakhstan

## **I The WHO Regional Office for Europe**

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Bosnia and Herzegovina	Norway
Bulgaria	Poland
Croatia	Portugal
Cyprus	Republic of Moldova
Czechia	Romania
Denmark	Russian Federation
Estonia	San Marino
Finland	Serbia
France	Slovakia
Georgia	Slovenia
Germany	Spain
Greece	Sweden
Hungary	Switzerland
Iceland	Tajikistan
Ireland	Türkiye
Israel	Turkmenistan
Italy	Ukraine
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Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan
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