

The International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN)



Progress Report 2004 - 2010



**Food and Agriculture
Organization of
the United Nations**



**World Health
Organization**

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Executive summary

Ensuring food safety and preventing foodborne diseases is an international public health concern. Food safety authorities around the world are constantly challenged by changes in microorganisms and new chemicals associated with food, as well as changes in food production techniques and consumer behaviours, which lead to new risks to the public. To combat these challenges, it is critical that food safety authorities around the globe collaborate and share information and experiences. One country's problem today, could be another country's problem tomorrow and there is a need to learn from each others' successes. The International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN), is a joint programme between the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the World Health Organization (WHO), and has been providing a mechanism to facilitate such sharing of information since 2004. While its full potential remains to be realized, significant progress has been made in building the Network and establishing partnerships to make it function.

In May 2010, the World Health Assembly (WHA) adopted a resolution on Advancing Food Safety Initiatives re-enforcing the importance of INFOSAN. The resolution encourages participation of all Member States in INFOSAN and its related activities. It calls for further development of INFOSAN and encourages communication and technical exchange of risk assessments and best practices among Network members. It also supports the strengthening of the emergency functions of INFOSAN, recognizing the Network as a critical component of WHO's preventive and emergency operations related to food safety.

This progress report provides an overview of INFOSAN by describing why and how it was formed and its aims and objectives. In addition, the various roles and responsibilities of Network members are explained and a summary of both the emergency and non-emergency functions of INFOSAN is included. Finally, some of the key challenges faced by the Network are expressed, and future directions addressed.

The success of INFOSAN is highly dependent on the close collaboration of its members. The Secretariat wishes to acknowledge members' past support and contributions as well as their continued involvement as we look to the future and strengthen partnerships to contribute to food safety around the world.

List of acronyms

CAC	Codex Alimentarius Commission
EWRS	Early Warning and Response System
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FOS	Department of Food Safety and Zoonoses
GFN	Global Foodborne Infections Network
GLEWS	Global Early Warning System for Major Animal Diseases, including Zoonoses
GOARN	Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network
IHR	International Health Regulations
INFOSAN	International Food Safety Authorities Network
OIE	World Organisation for Animal Health
RASFF	Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed
WHA	World Health Assembly
WHO	World Health Organization

1. Background

1.1 Why was INFOSAN formed?

The rapid globalization of food production and trade has increased the potential for international incidents involving contaminated food. As a result, food safety problems discovered in one country are often of interest or concern to others.

While implementing effective prevention strategies through the entire, so-called, farm-to-fork continuum is the most effective way to produce safe food, it is impossible to completely eliminate food contamination events. Dealing with these events requires the rapid access and exchange of food safety information at both national and international level. Clear, reliable and authoritative information about food safety has been recognized as an essential need, not only for prevention and response measures, but also for maintaining international food trade and consumer confidence in the food supply.

In 2000, the WHO World Health Assembly adopted a resolution calling for improved communication between WHO and Member States on matters of food safety (1). In 2002, serious concerns were expressed at the World Health Assembly about health emergencies posed by natural, accidental and intentional contamination of food (2). Recommendations for the establishment of an international food safety network resulted from a series of international conferences, including the FAO/WHO Global Forum for Food Safety Regulators in 2002 and the FAO/WHO Pan-European Conference on Food Safety and Quality, also in 2002. Subsequently, in 2003, WHO published a report on potential terrorist threats to food, which includes guidance for establishing and strengthening prevention and response systems (3). This report identifies a food safety emergency network as one of the basic measures of preparedness needed at international level. In 2004, the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) revised their principles and guidelines on the exchange of information in food safety emergency situations (4). The guidelines request that Member States designate official contact points from their competent authorities to exchange information during food safety emergency situations. WHO is responsible for keeping the list of official contacts up to date.

Based on these mandates and recommendations, the International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) was developed to facilitate the sharing of food safety information and experience, and to promote collaboration between food safety authorities at national and international levels. At the World Health Assembly in May 2010, a resolution on Advancing Food Safety Initiatives was adopted which re-emphasized the important role of INFOSAN and re-enforced its mandate (5).

1.2 How was INFOSAN formed?

In February 2004, funding was secured for the initial establishment of INFOSAN. As a result, in March 2004, WHO and its Regional Offices, in cooperation with the FAO, took first steps to establish the Network. This was achieved by requesting officially designated INFOSAN Emergency Contact Points and INFOSAN Focal Points from each Member State. In October 2004, INFOSAN was officially inaugurated at the FAO/WHO Second Global Forum for Food Safety Regulators with approximately 100 members.

1.3 Aims and objectives of INFOSAN

With the goal of preventing the international spread of contaminated food and foodborne disease and strengthening food safety systems globally, INFOSAN seeks to:

- I. promote the rapid exchange of information during food safety-related events;
- II. share information on important food safety-related issues of global interest;
- III. promote partnership and collaboration between countries;
- IV. help countries strengthen their capacity to manage food safety risks.

The work of INFOSAN has two distinct components:

1) Routine INFOSAN activities:

- a. INFOSAN Information Notes are developed by the INFOSAN Secretariat on a regular basis to provide key information about emergent or topical food safety issues.
- b. Food safety guidelines, questionnaires, newsletters and factsheets are shared with INFOSAN members for further dissemination within their organizations.
- c. INFOSAN members aid routine in-country sharing of information to strengthen the national food control system.

2) INFOSAN Emergency activities:

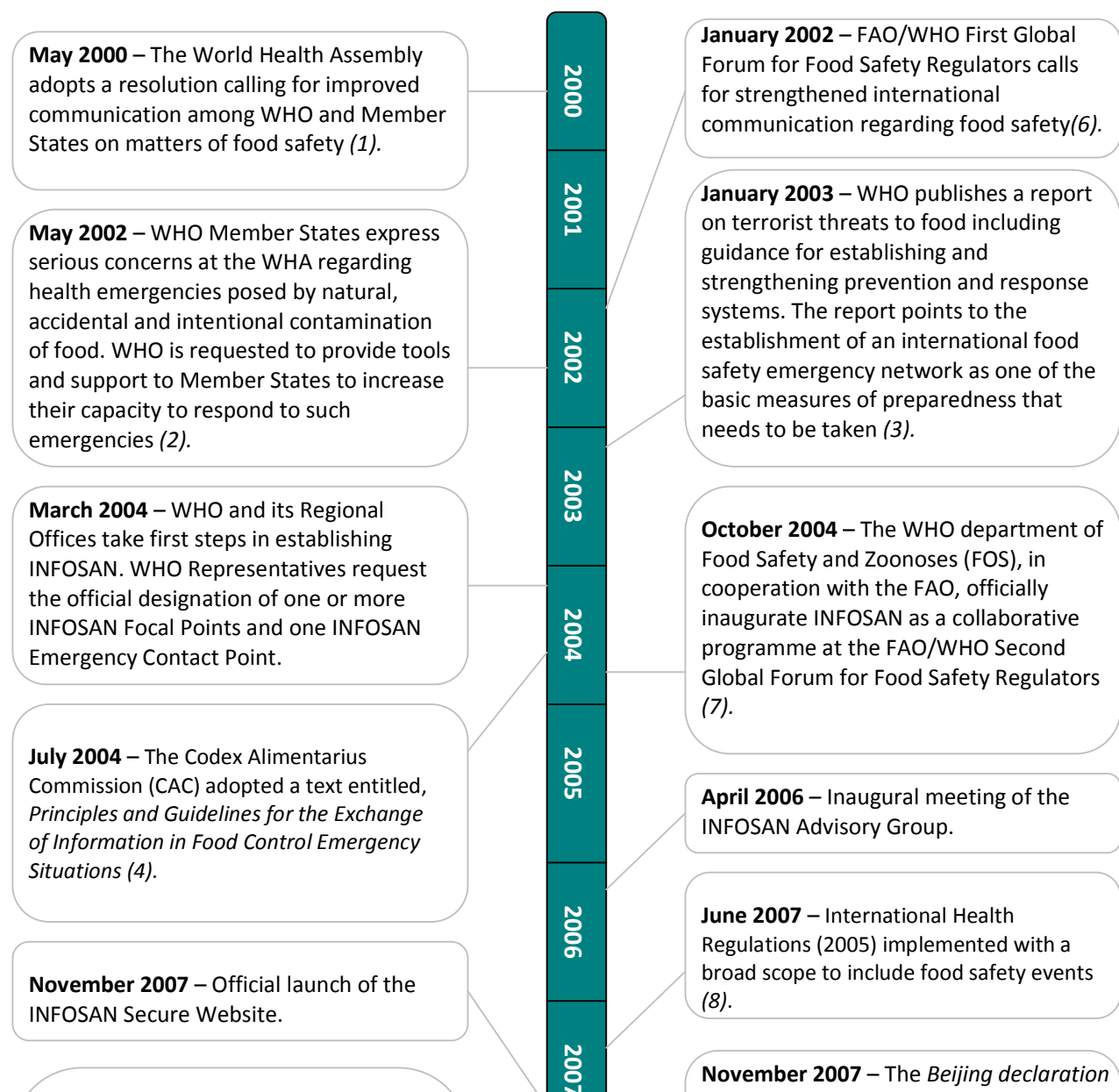
- a. INFOSAN identifies, verifies and shares information on food safety-related events which involve contaminated foods in international commerce, and foodborne illness outbreaks, not limited to one country.
- b. INFOSAN Secretariat provides technical assistance to national governments in managing food safety and food production-related events or emergencies.
- c. Emergency Contact Points are actively engaged to provide updated information on food safety events and to ensure timely information exchange with countries potentially importing or exporting the implicated product.

Box 1.

INFOSAN highlights

- INFOSAN provides rapid access to food safety contact points in 170 countries and to expertise in FAO and WHO. during food safety emergencies.
- INFOSAN has been active in hundreds of food safety events since its inception in 2004.
- INFOSAN provides a confidential mechanism for information sharing through the use of a secure web platform.
- INFOSAN facilitates the sharing of lessons learnt and the exchange of new knowledge related to food safety and foodborne illness.
- INFOSAN has published 35 Information Notes on a broad range of food safety topics, made publicly available on the WHO website.
- INFOSAN has partnered numerous international groups to strengthen the Network and enhance collaborative activities.
- INFOSAN continues to be cited in published literature and is recognized as an authoritative source of food safety information.

1.4 Milestones in the development of INFOSAN



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