



Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Meeting Report

Side event to the 8th session of the FAO/WHO Coordinating Committee for the Near East

FAO GM Foods Platform: benefits for the CCNE countries 2 June 2015, Rome, Italy, 12.00 – 13.15 hrs

On 2 June 2015, a side event to the 8th session of the FAO/WHO Coordinating Committee for the Near East (CCNE) entitled “FAO GM Foods Platform: benefits for the CCNE countries” was organized at the FAO headquarters (HQ) in Rome, Italy. The final agenda is attached as Annex 1. A total of 31 delegates from Egypt, Iran, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Tunisia attended the side event. The list of participants is attached as Annex 2. The side event organization was facilitated by Masami Takeuchi (FAO) and Kosuke Shiraishi (Intern, FAO)

Welcome remarks

Ms Fatima Hachem, Senior Nutrition and Consumer Protection Officer, FAO Regional Office for Near East and North Africa (FAORNE)



The meeting was opened by Ms Fatima Hachem. She stated that FAO works to assist its member countries in capacity development to make evidence-based risk management decisions. FAO also provides technical advice for the establishment of appropriate regulatory frameworks in the fields of biosafety and food safety.

Ms Hachem explained that it is important for the region to start sharing information for strengthening regional collaboration in the area of food safety. This includes information sharing on GM food safety assessment. She briefly informed the participants of the current participation status of the CCNE countries to the Platform activities since the launch of the Platform in July 2013.

Ms Hachem also said that this side event would be a good opportunity for all CCNE countries to join the Platform community to receive its benefits in sharing and accessing the relevant data and information. She concluded with her wish that this meeting would be fruitful for all.

Presentation: “Codex Plant Guidelines Annex III: Sharing information on safety assessment of foods derived from rDNA plants”

Mr Tom Heilandt, Secretary, Codex Alimentarius Commission

Mr Tom Heilandt began his presentation by reminding the audience that protecting consumers' health and ensuring fair trade practices are the main mandate of the Codex Alimentarius

Commission. Harmonizing national standards with international Codex standards will facilitate trade.

Mr Heilandt briefly introduced the history of Codex work relevant to modern biotechnology. The objectives of the “Codex *Ad Hoc* Intergovernmental Task Force on Food Derived from Biotechnology (TFFBT)” were (a) to elaborate standards, guidelines or other principles, as appropriate, for foods derived from modern biotechnology, taking account, in particular, of the Principles for the Risk Analysis of Foods derived from Modern Biotechnology; (b) to coordinate and closely collaborate, as necessary, with appropriate Codex Committees within their mandate as relates to foods derived from modern biotechnology; and (c) to take account of existing work carried out by national authorities, FAO, WHO, other international organizations and other relevant international fora.



Mr Heilandt discussed the Scope of Annex III of the Codex “*Guidelines for the conduct of food safety assessment from recombinant-DNA plants (CAC/GL 68-2008)*”¹ which was one of the key outputs of the TFFBT. The Annex comprises three sections: (i) acknowledgement of asymmetric authorizations and consequent Low Level Presence (LLP) situations; (ii) recommendations for food safety assessment in an LLP situation; and (iii) data and information sharing to facilitate utilization of Annex III.

Finally, Mr Heilandt emphasized the importance of the agreement reached by all Codex Members regarding the issue of information sharing on the safety assessment of foods derived from recombinant DNA (r-DNA) plants. Paragraphs 27 and 28 in the Annex stated that: (i) Members should have access to requisite data and information; and (ii) Members should make information available in a database maintained by FAO. He stressed that the Platform would only be useful when relevant data and information are sufficiently shared by Members.

Presentation: FAO GM Foods Platform: Current situation and opportunities for CCNE countries

Ms Masami Takeuchi, Food Safety Officer & FAO GM Foods Platform Manager, FAO



Ms Masami Takeuchi first explained the structure of the FAO GM Foods Platform. She then explained the Platform’s benefits to the Members. In the individual scale, the benefits include: access to the latest information regarding GM food safety assessment, access to resources in conducting risk management of GM plants, usefulness as a tool for an emergency response in cases of LLP of GM materials to look up references and GM food safety assessment results produced by other countries, references in locating exact

¹ Available on the website of the Codex Alimentarius at: http://www.codexalimentarius.org/standards/list-standards/en/?no_cache=1

contact points of trade-partners in case there is a query on certain traded commodity and relevant GM food safety assessment information and opportunity to become an active Member of a global community of biosafety.

From the global perspective, the Platform achieves its goals in protecting consumers playing a role of global, independent, neutral and transparent source of information on GM food safety assessment, providing science-based resources and information for securing food safety, addressing the global needs expressed by Codex Alimentarius in providing the information exchange forum for LLP situations, avoiding trade disruption caused by divergence of GM food safety assessment regulations and facilitating a global “Community of Practice” for possible capacity development in the area of biosafety. Using a hypothetical case study, Ms Takeuchi also conducted a demonstration on how one can find specific information.

Regarding the current status of the CCNE countries in the Platform activities, Ms Takeuchi explained that among the six Codex regions, Africa, Asia and Pacific, North America and South West Pacific, Latin America and Caribbean, Near East (NE) and Europe, NE region’s participation to the Platform is low in terms of data sharing. In addition to the information on the regional contribution to the Platform, Ms Takeuchi presented the global status. As of 20 May 2015, 162 (out of 186) countries have nominated their Focal Points, 102 countries have completed their country profile pages, 21 countries have created mutual links between the Platform and their national webpages and Platform hosts 716 records by 16 actively participating countries. She once again emphasized the importance of active participation from the NE countries and suggested to contact FAO who is willing to assist the process towards active participation of the countries to obtain maximum benefits from the Platform.

Presentation: GMO status - Sudan

Ms Maha Abdalla Mohamed Ibrahim, Executive Office Manager of the Sudanese Standards and Metrology Organization, Ministry of Cabinet

Ms Maha Abdalla Mohamed Ibrahim from Sudan explained the current status of GM foods and the experience with the international databases including the FAO GM Foods Platform. Sudan has been a member of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), Codex Alimentarius, FAO, African Regional Organization for Standardization (ARSO) and International Organization for Standardization (ISO), and signed the Cartagena Protocol in 2005. In addition to the membership of the above organizations, Sudan has laws (National Biosafety Law) and regulations implemented on GM foods. Currently, the National Biosafety Council (NBC) is responsible for regulation and risk assessment of GM foods with representatives from all concerned institutions.



Ms Ibrahim explained Sudan’s participation level to the Platform. Sudan joined the Platform in 2013 with two Focal Points and they have already completed the country profile. She stated that Sudan has not yet shared the information on the risk assessment of GM foods due to some technical difficulties. However, she added that by the end of this year Sudan would be able to share the

executed studies on the Platform. For this reason, Sudan needs technical assistance from FAO with regard to the capacity development on technical issues, institutional framework development and awareness raising on the topic.

Presentation: GM food regulation status in Saudi Arabia

Mr Hani Mansi, Regional and International Standards Dept. Manager of Technical Regulations & standards, Saudi Food and Drug Authority



Mr Hani Mansi from Saudi Arabia first explained that in his country, all relevant regulations are harmonized at Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) level. The Saudi Food and Drug Authority (SFDA) is responsible for setting food technical regulations and standards. In addition, the GCC Standardization Organization (GSO) technical subcommittee for “Organic, Functional and Genetically-modified Food” is concerned with preparing and updating GM technical regulations and standards. In Saudi Arabia, not only SFDA but also Ministry of Health and Ministry of Agriculture are involved in the GM food matters.

Mr Mansi explained that in Saudi Arabia, the FAO GM Foods Platform as well as international reliable resources such as food safety authority websites and risk assessment bodies have been used for those resources. Accordingly, experience on effective usage of the Platform was shared.

The challenges that Saudi Arabia is facing include not having enough number of national/regional studies about GM food safety issues for science-based decision making. Moreover, research centers working on GM food safety assessment are not sufficient nor in quantity nor quality.

Discussions

The discussion session was chaired by Ms Hachem. Country status, overall challenges and capacity development needs were discussed. Participants shared challenges that they are facing in improving their participation in the Platform activities.

The meeting first discussed lack of policy makers’ awareness on the importance of the topic. It is making it difficult to establish a legal framework that binds GM food safety assessment as a requirement in regulating GM food, thus there is no data/information available for the countries to share on the Platform. Capacity development for technical work in conducting GM food safety assessment was found to be highly important.

Also, participants agreed that consumer awareness and perception of GM food are important to be analyzed to set a direction of the regulatory framework. However, the general level of awareness in the region is found to be extremely low and it is a challenge for policy makers to even initiate an open discussion for the general public. Furthermore, the importance of maintaining the access to relevant information was highlighted thus the FAO GM Foods Platform was confirmed to be valuable. Following the general discussion, each country shared its status in terms of relevant activities on the topic of GMOs.

1. Egypt

Egypt has a regulatory framework for biotechnology. However, Egypt is currently in the process of creating the specialized framework for GM foods. The next step for Egypt is the acquisition of the information on the safety assessment of GM foods from other countries. In addition to the guidelines offered in the webpage, Egypt would like to have support from FAO in the process of the information acquisition and interpretation of the data. The priority issues on GM foods for Egypt include: 1) a strong need in raising awareness on GM food issues among regulatory bodies and consumers; and 2) strengthening communication and coordination among various concerned government agencies as well as between government and consumers. In order to overcome these issues, Egypt would like to have support from FAO, especially with issues relevant to the decision-making process in labeling of GM foods.

2. Iran

Iran has established rules and regulations on GM foods in terms of their import/export as well as safety assessment. Iran has completed its country profile page on the FAO GM Foods Platform and is currently in the process of uploading its national records on GM food risk assessment (not yet completed). As the Iranian participant is not directly involved in the work related to this topic, he would convey the issue and discussion outputs to the Platform Focal Point and work with him for uploading the GM food safety assessment information to the Platform.

3. Jordan

Jordan does not accept import of GM foods. The Jordanian participant is also not directly involved in the work related to GMOs.

4. Lebanon

Lebanon has a Focal Point to the Platform and already completed its country profile page. Lebanon also created a link to the Platform from its national website. In addition, Lebanon has not conducted safety assessment of GM foods therefore there is no data to share on the Platform.

5. Libya

In Libya, GM foods are not allowed. With regard to the status of the Platform, Libya has not nominated their Focal Point to the Platform. The Libyan participant was not aware of the nomination process of a Focal Point. FAO's assistance is required to complete the process.

6. Saudi Arabia

In Saudi Arabia, the SFDA is responsible for the matter of GM foods. Saudi Arabia has a regulatory framework to authorize the import and export of GM foods. Saudi Arabia has a Focal Point to the Platform but has not yet completed the country profile. The Saudi Arabian participant will work with the Focal Point and complete the country profile once he returns to the country. FAO will assist in the process.

7. Sudan

Sudan has a regulatory framework for GM foods and has now cultivated insect resistant Bt cotton. Sudan has recently established the NBC, a technical community on biosafety in which the delegates come from different communities and agencies. As NBC is new, Sudan needs international assistance on conducting safety assessment of GM foods thus making a science-based decision. The

Sudanese participant stated that international assistance in communicating with consumers on this matter is needed. Furthermore, Sudan would like to learn from other countries that have conducted safety assessment.

8. Tunisia

Tunisia is now in the process of making regulations to segregate GM foods. The problems it is facing include: 1) lack of relevant laws, regulations and policies on GM foods; 2) insufficient capacity in detecting and analyzing GM foods in research institutions and laboratories; and 3) ineffective communication among different government agencies. To overcome these problems, international assistance on establishing a monitoring system of GMOs and training on GM food safety assessment are needed.

Conclusion and a way forward

Ms Masami Takeuchi

Ms Takeuchi concluded that this side event provided the opportunity for FAO to clearly understand the issues and challenges that the CCNE countries are facing. She stated that FAO would be following up with each country individually to assist them in active participation in the Platform activities. Ms Takeuchi also stated that capacity development needs can be flagged to the FAO GM Foods Platform team so that FAO can consider possible provision of technical assistance. She thanked everyone for their inputs and insightful comments. Special thanks went to the Chair, Ms Hachem, and to all the presenters.

Distributed materials

During the side event, the following materials were distributed:

- FAO GM Food Safety Assessment Tools for Trainers, also available at <http://www.fao.org/docrep/012/i0110e/i0110e00.htm>
- FAO GM Foods Platform Brochure
- A summary table of the participation status of CCNE countries to the Platform (Annex 3)
- Relevant Codex Plant Guidelines , also available at http://www.codexalimentarius.org/download/standards/10021/CXG_045e.pdf

A summary report of the event (the present document) and all the presentation files are available online at <http://fao.org/gm-platform/> under the “Resources” page.

Acronyms

ARSO	African Regional Organization for Standardization
BCH	Biosafety Clearing House
CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
CCNE	Joint FAO/WHO Regional Coordinating Committee for the Near East
CFI	Chamber of Food Industries
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FAORNE	FAO Regional Office for Near East and North Africa
GCC	Gulf Cooperation Council
GM	Genetically Modified
GMO	Genetically Modified Organism
GSO	GCC Standardization Organization
IDF/FIL	International Dairy Federation
IFAH	International Animal Health Organisation
IFPRI	International Food Policy Research Institute
INSO	Iranian National Standards Organization
IRI	The Industrial Research Institute
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
LLP	Low Level Presence
NE	Near East
NBC	National Biosafety Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
SFDA	Saudi Food and Drug Authority
SSMO	Sudanese Standard & Metrology Organization
r-DNA	Recombinant-DNA
TFFBT	Codex Ad Hoc Task Force on Food derived from Biotechnology
WHO	World Health Organization

Final Meeting Agenda

FAO GM Foods Platform: Benefits for CCNE countries

<http://fao.org/gm-platform/>

Tuesday, 2 June 2015 12.00–13.00

Ethiopia Room, FAO HQ, Rome, Italy

Side event to the 8th Codex Alimentarius Commission

Time	Agenda Item	Presenter
12:00 – 12:05	House-keeping Announcement	
12:05 – 12:10	Welcome Remarks	Ms Fatima Hachem, Chair, FAORNE
12:10 – 12:20	Codex Plant Guidelines Annex III: Sharing information on safety assessment of foods derived from rDNA plants	Mr Tom Heilandt, Codex Secretary
12:20 – 12:30	FAO GM Foods Platform: Current situation and opportunities for CCNE countries	Ms Masami Takeuchi, FAOHQ
12:30 – 12:50	Case studies by two countries	Sudan Saudi Arabia
12:50 – 12:55	Questions and Answers on Presentations	All
12:55 – 13:10	Discussions: Opportunities and challenges in actively participating in the Platform	Facilitated by the Chair
13:10 – 13:15	Conclusion and a way forward	Ms Takeuchi
	Lunch	

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Annex 3

Participation Status

	ALG	BHA	EGY	IRN	IRQ	KUW	JOR	LEB	LIB	OMA	QAT	SAU	SUD	SYR	TUN	UAE	YEM
Focal point nominated	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Registered to the Platform	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✗	✓	✓	✓
Country profile page completed	✗	✓	✗	✓	✓	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✓	✓
Data submitted to the Platform	✗	-	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
No safety assessment confirmed	✗	✓	✗	-	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗
Mutual link created with the Platform	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗