

## Food safety must accompany food and nutrition security



Despite progress in reducing undernutrition, our planet's population is still affected by many food-related challenges, including vitamin and mineral deficiencies, obesity, and non-communicable diseases. These challenges are fuelled, in part, by cheap, convenient, and highly-processed foods that are appealing to the taste. But food threats do not stop there. One area to which the international community has given substantial, but less visible, attention is ensuring the safety from infection and contamination of the food we produce, trade, and eat.

These issues will be on the agenda when government leaders from around the world gather in Rome, Italy for the second International Conference on Nutrition,<sup>1</sup> co-hosted by WHO and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, on Nov 19–21, 2014. We would like to see a political declaration calling for a global approach to sustainably provide all people with a safe, healthy, and diversified diet. But what should that diet consist of? And how will we ensure the safety of the food constituting our healthy diet?

Everyone needs food, and needs it every day. We need a large base of plant foods, including fruit, vegetables, cereals, pulses, and vegetable oils, generally accompanied by an adequate quantity of animal-source foods. Intakes of free sugars and saturated fats need to be kept low, representing no more than 10% and possibly less of our total energy consumption, and salt consumption should be less than 5 grams per day. We need to cook our own food and eat socially.

That food must be nutritious—and safe. Yet food safety is a hidden, and often overlooked, problem. Most people suffering from diarrhoea do not consult a physician. Diseases and deaths might be attributed to other causes, even when the food that people have eaten is the culprit. How often do we hear the phrase “It must be something I ate”? Foodborne diseases, caused either by an acute infection with a pathogen or by chronic exposure to chemicals, are largely under-reported. Nobody has precise figures on their societal effect. All we know is that the most vulnerable populations, infants and elderly people, are increasing in number, and hence the pool of those people at greatest risk of disease is expanding.

A global scandal is often needed to stir the collective consciousness on food safety, such as the bovine

spongiform encephalopathy crisis in the 1990s or the adulteration of milk with melamine in 2008, which hit some countries badly. The threat of food safety is then largely forgotten until the next emergency. It is high time for a sustainable response to the core problems, which are fragmentation of food safety authorities, unstable budgets, and a dearth of convincing evidence on the effect of foodborne diseases.

For these reasons, WHO will dedicate its 2015 World Health Day to food safety, to catalyse collective government and public action to put measures in place that will improve safety of food from farms, factories, street vendors, and kitchens. Also in 2015, WHO will, for the first time, publish estimates of the global burden of foodborne disease, finally showing the scale of the problem.<sup>2</sup> New methods will allow countries to estimate their own foodborne disease burdens to inform policies and mobilise badly needed resources. Today, the food chain extends over thousands of kilometres, crossing many national borders, and containing many steps from production to consumption. An error by a food producer in one country can affect the health of consumers on the other side of the planet. In our globalised world, not only people but foods, as well, travel far and fast.

Food safety needs concerted global effort. WHO has long collaborated on several joint activities with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Organization for Animal Health to ensure food safety at all stages of the food chain.<sup>3</sup> Together we assess the

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risk of foodborne hazards, set international standards, operate global alert mechanisms, assess the relevance and safety of new food technologies, and help countries to build basic capacities. I hope national governments will follow this example and build bridges between sectors to advance public health causes. Food safety is a litmus test of government ability to foster multisectoral dialogue and coordination, especially between health, agriculture, trade, and environment sectors.

Food safety entails other public health concerns, and antimicrobial resistance is one such concern. Resistant microorganisms entering the food chain are a significant health security threat today. In combating antimicrobial resistance, prudent use of antimicrobials in human medicine is crucial. Equally crucial is their use in agriculture, particularly animal husbandry and aquaculture. Food safety should serve as a platform to bring stakeholders together to raise awareness and take steps towards solving the problem. In May, 2015, WHO will present a global action plan<sup>4</sup> to the World Health Assembly to address the growing problem of antimicrobial resistance.

Production of safe food is a driving force for sustainable development. Developing countries can access the global market only when proving that their products comply with international food safety norms. Increasingly aware of the link between food safety and economic development, these countries actively participate in setting international food standards within the Codex Alimentarius Commission.<sup>5</sup>

Food is vital to our lives, like air and water, providing pleasure and much more. The first food a human being consumes—breast milk—is one of the safest

for newborn babies, providing all essential nutrients, offering immunological protection, and creating an emotional bond between mother and child. All foods introduced later belong to our respective cultures. For decades, WHO has advocated safe and hygienic practices for food preparation. WHO's Five Keys to Safer Food<sup>6</sup> apply to all cultures and communities. But national and local authorities must communicate the importance of food safety in messages that are tailor-made to their communities, because foods and eating practices vary greatly from one place to another.

It would be disastrous if the food at the centre of our lives were to become unsafe for consumption. Much needs to be done to prevent this, and we can begin by aligning policies in agriculture, trade, health, education, and social protection to provide a safe and healthy diet for all.

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