The Thirty-first World Health Assembly (1978) discussed the principles and orientation of the WHO food safety programme and, in its resolution WHA31.49, requested the Director-General to proceed along the lines indicated in his report. The present report, prepared in response to this resolution, provides information on the progress of the programme since May 1978 in terms of technical cooperation, food safety evaluation, and food standards and codes of practice.

1. Introduction

1.1 As outlined in the report\textsuperscript{1} submitted by the Director-General to the Thirty-first World Health Assembly in May 1978, which was endorsed in resolution WHA31.49, WHO's food safety programme\textsuperscript{2} is being developed in the following main directions: (1) review and analysis of national needs and transfer of information; (2) technical cooperation, particularly in developing national food safety policies and programmes and an effective infrastructure for sanitary food protection; (3) assessment of the risk to health of chemicals used as food additives or found in food as contaminants; and (4) coordination and collaboration with FAO and the Codex Alimentarius Commission as regards food safety standards.

1.2 The promotion of food safety has been included in the global medium-term programme for the promotion of environmental health for the period 1978-1983, which is being reviewed by the Health Assembly under provisional agenda item 2.7.4.2, and technical cooperation with Member States in developing national food safety programmes has been given a high priority in the African, Eastern Mediterranean and European Regions.\textsuperscript{3}

1.3 Food control strategy, as elaborated by a joint FAO/WHO consultation in 1977,\textsuperscript{4} was discussed by a joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Regional Conference for Latin America, held in Mexico City in September 1978, and at the second session of the Codex Coordinating Committee for Asia, held in Manila in March 1979.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{1} Document A31/28 (Problems of the human environment: Food hygiene).
\item \textsuperscript{2} See WHO Official Records, No. 250, 1978, pp. 232-233 (programme 5.1.4).
\item \textsuperscript{3} See Document A32/13 (WHO's human health and environment programme: Review of the medium-term programme for the promotion of environmental health).
\end{itemize}
Activities contributing to the food safety programme, other than those referred to in the proposed programme budget for 1980-1981 under programme 5.1.4 (Food safety), appear under the following programmes: Bacterial, viral and mycotic diseases, including zoonoses (programme 4.1.3); Nutrition (programme 3.2.2); Recognition and control of environmental hazards (programme 5.1.3); and Basic sanitary measures (programme 5.1.2). Of particular importance are those activities concerned with the prevention and control of diarrhoeal diseases and of zoonoses transmitted through food.

2. Review and analysis of national needs and transfer of information

2.1 A review of national food safety needs has been initiated by analysing available documentation relating to the national authorities responsible for food safety, national food legislation, training opportunities for food safety personnel, and joint FAO/WHO activities funded by other United Nations organs that have food safety components.

2.2 Towards the end of 1978, WHO staff members visited Bangladesh, Indonesia and Thailand, while in early 1979 a WHO consultant visited Malaysia, the Philippines, and the Republic of Korea. In these countries - and probably many others - the predominant health problems associated with food are those of biological contamination, mainly because of poor basic sanitation and inadequate health education and personal hygiene.

2.3 The services of the WHO programme on food virology have been increasingly used by food control authorities, epidemiologists dealing with foodborne disease, and research workers in Member States to obtain data on foodborne viruses and their effects on human health. In addition to the existing WHO collaborating centre at Madison, Wisconsin, USA, a second centre has been established at Brno, Czechoslovakia, which will collect, evaluate and make available data on the characteristics of viruses relevant to food hygiene.

3. Technical cooperation

3.1 To promote technical cooperation in food safety, a project for direct support to regional and country programmes has been included among the proposed global and interregional activities for the period 1980-1981.

3.2 Regional activities planned for 1980-1981 differ in emphasis according to the main food safety problems of the respective regions. Thus the African Region is emphasizing the need for appropriate legislation on food hygiene. In the Region of the Americas, food protection programmes will be amplified and extended to reduce waste and the economic losses resulting from biological and chemical food contamination; the technical programme aims largely at strengthening certain components of national food protection services such as laboratory facilities and personnel training. In the South-East Asia Region, technical cooperation will be provided to upgrade laboratory facilities and the personnel involved in food protection, with special reference to food microbiology and food toxicology.

3.3 In Europe, the regional programmes emphasize training in food hygiene, a study of methods (including laboratory procedures) used in the Region for controlling harmful residues, the health aspects of mass catering, and food safety information. The improvement of food safety and hygiene is of the utmost concern in the Eastern Mediterranean Region, where the toll taken by acute diarrhoeal diseases among children under 5 years of age still constitutes a grave public health problem, and where repeated outbreaks of cholera have been traced to faecally contaminated food rather than to water supplies. The programme for the Western Pacific Region emphasizes the group training of sanitary inspectors, technical cooperation in improving legislation, and the upgrading of analytical capabilities of food surveillance laboratories.

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3.4 An international programme on the control of foodborne infections and intoxications, to provide the participating countries with information on the incidence and epidemiological features of these conditions and on various surveillance and control methods, is now being initiated in the European Region; in view of the interest they have shown, it is envisaged that other regions will join the programme later.

3.5 A project has been initiated on the health hazards of paralytic shellfish poisoning, with particular emphasis on the development of appropriate methods for the surveillance and control of the causative organisms.

3.6 The coordination of international postgraduate training courses on food microbiology for students from developing countries has resulted in integration of the activities of the four European training centres participating in this programme. WHO-supported training courses now tend to be held in the developing countries; the courses in food microbiology will follow this trend (one such course has already taken place in India) and so provide a more pertinent type of training linked to the factual needs of these countries.

3.7 The joint FAO/WHO food and animal feed contamination monitoring programme, being carried out in collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) within the global Environmental Monitoring System (GEMS), has been reviewed and reoriented. From 1979, emphasis will be placed on the collection of current data, with due regard to quality control, for example by the exchange of standard samples and inter-laboratory comparison of results. As far as possible, this will be coordinated with other components of health-oriented monitoring, such as air, water and biological monitoring.

3.8 A project on fungal contamination control and human health is being implemented in Swaziland under the guidance of the International Agency for Research on Cancer (IARC) and with the support of UNEP, FAO and WHO, one of the long-term objectives being to reduce the incidence of liver cancer and other health hazards associated with mycotoxins, such as aflatoxins.

4. Food safety evaluation

4.1 Evaluations of the health risks associated with food additives, pesticide residues and food contaminants have again been undertaken by the Joint FAO/WHO Expert Committee on Food Additives and the 1978 Joint Meeting of the FAO Panel on Pesticide Residues and the Environment and the WHO Expert Group on Pesticide Residues. Among the food additives evaluated in 1978 were a number of food colours, sweetening agents and contaminants including asbestos, lead, mercury and tin,¹ and among the pesticides, some organochlorine and organophosphorus compounds and some carbamates.²

4.2 These two activities now have a long tradition (over 20 years) and are especially appreciated by smaller countries that are not in a position to carry out their own toxicological evaluations. However, it has become difficult to keep abreast of the increasing number of substances concerned and to obtain the amount of data now required to assess toxicity. These two components of the food safety programme will therefore be included in the international programme of chemical safety that will become operational in 1980;³ this new programme will be based on the active participation of national institutions guided and coordinated by a programme advisory committee and a WHO central unit.

3 To be discussed under provisional agenda item 2.7.4.1; see document A32/12 (Evaluation of the effects of chemicals on health).
5. Food standards and codes of practice

5.1 The joint FAO/WHO food standards programme, the principal organ of which is the Codex Alimentarius Commission (now comprising 117 Member States), continues to develop international food standards and hygienic codes of practice for the safe handling of food.

5.2 At its twelfth session, held in Rome in April 1978, the Commission reviewed and assessed the results of its work. It agreed that the activities of its general subject committees (on food hygiene, food additives, food residues, food labelling, methods of analysis and sampling, and general principles) were essential to its future work, were of value for both developed and developing countries, and should therefore continue. However, the Commission decided that five Codex committees (for edible ices, sugars, soups and broths, natural mineral waters, and meat), having completed their respective assignments, should adjourn sine die. This decision should enable the Commission to devote more of its time and activity to the needs of developing countries.

5.3 The Commission established new Codex committees for cereals and cereal products, and for vegetable proteins, and decided to reactivate the Codex Committee on Meat Hygiene in order to elaborate a code of principles for ante and post mortem judgement of slaughter animals and meat, and a code of hygienic practice for game animals.

5.4 A food inspectors' manual for use in developing countries is being prepared as part of the project "Strengthening the work of the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission and the FAO/WHO capabilities to assist developing countries in food control - Phase II". This manual should be ready in late 1979 or early 1980.

5.5 The development of internationally acceptable microbiological criteria for foods has been in progress for the last five years. An FAO/WHO working group on this subject met in February 1979. To date, criteria have been developed for some important food items and a set of guidelines on general principles for establishing microbiological criteria has been drawn up. This work aims at improving the protection of consumers from the health risks of microbiological food contamination and at facilitating international trade in foodstuffs.

5.6 At its April 1978 session, the Codex Alimentarius Commission paid particular attention to the role and work of its Coordinating Committees for Africa, Asia and Latin America and entrusted them with new functions to make them more effective in advancing the interests of their respective regions. To make more effective use of the WHO staff involved in food safety, WHO representation at the regional Codex coordinating committees will gradually be taken over by the WHO regional offices concerned.

5.7 In view of the concern expressed by some developing countries that international food standards might adversely affect trade, the Commission amended its procedure for the elaboration of worldwide Codex standards so that in future governments will be asked to comment not only on the technical aspects of draft standards but also on their possible economic implications.