My name is Dr Mamadou Ndiaye. I am an expert in fishery products, working with professional organizations in the fishing industry, and this is my Codex story.

When I arrived at the 41st Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC41) meeting in Rome, the scale of it was quite daunting. There were perhaps a thousand delegates from the 188 Member Countries plus the EU. I felt rather lost, especially as I don’t speak English very well, and I admit that I was a little sceptical - because I wondered how Senegal, a country with fewer than 15 million inhabitants, could influence decisions at an international level.

**PARTICIPATING IN CODEX**

There’s a lot at stake in Codex work. It is about establishing international terms of trade in food products. Our delegation was able to register Senegal’s interest in and contribution to discussions on a number of standards and codes of practice. Among the most significant standards for our delegation was the *Guidance for Histamine Control in the Code of Practice for Fish and Fishery Products CXC 52-2003*. Fish is a product of key importance to my nation: Senegal has more than 700 km of coastline and the annual consumption of fish per person exceeds 20 kg.

This is my area of expertise. I am a veterinarian by training and am expert in the preparation of fresh, frozen and canned fish. I have experience across the entire fisheries and aquaculture sectors, and I have also been an expert trainer in food safety since the year 2000.
In Senegal we eat mainly small marine fish, which are very rich in the vital amino acid, histidine. But due to weaknesses in the cold chain, that histidine can often convert into histamine and cause scombroid food poisoning. This also affects trade. The fishing sector contributes 11.9% of export revenues and it provides stable jobs for over 1 million people.

Having helped our Codex office to prepare position papers and having attended the CTF "negotiation skills" workshop, I was well-placed to act as a “second row” contributor. And as I did so, the meeting seemed less vast, the faces more familiar and I started to feel more at home.
In the 40 years since Senegal joined Codex, despite occupying the positions of regional coordinator (1978-9) and vice-chair of the CAC (1974 and 1989), the National Codex Committee (NCC) had weakened capacity to advise relevant authorities and spearhead national food safety initiatives. Numerous departments had food safety responsibilities: the ministries of health, trade, livestock, fisheries, agriculture and the environment but there was no interministerial communication and no risk-based assessments. Food safety work was fragmented, incoherent and ineffective. The regulatory framework was weak. We were not taking advantage of the Codex standards and expertise at our disposal. Indeed, many stakeholders knew nothing about Codex.

In the mid-2000s, I was persuaded to join a government effort to revitalize the NCC and promote a national food safety system as well as improve conditions for Senegal to play a much bigger part in international trade in food. This involved bringing together not only representatives of each of the responsible ministries, but also public and private laboratories, consumer associations, scientific experts, private sector actors and professional organizations. They organized training for all these stakeholders, established a committee of scientific experts and established an alert management framework.

I appreciated the NCC’s efforts in improving food safety within Senegal, but I could not see how Senegal would find a voice on the world standards-setting stage. That changed with the success of the NCC’s application for CTF funding in 2016. This was a project that involved training and awareness-raising not only with members of the NCC but also at a ministerial level and among stakeholders that could participate in Codex work. The aim was to build networks and update regulations in line with the World Trade Organization’s agreements on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures and on Technical Barriers to Trade.

In April 2018, I attended a workshop held in Dakar to improve the participation of Senegalese delegates in the work of the CAC, involving all stakeholders in our now burgeoning food safety system. We learnt how to identify the standards we should be involved in, prepare our position and voice it. The workshop included role playing and training in the procedures detailed in the Codex manual. We simulated a meeting including
countries with diverging interests and observers representing both industry and consumers. We were taught about negotiation and standing up for our national interests.

It was during this workshop that I came to understand that Senegal has the same rights as any other country. For the first time, I was persuaded of the value of Senegal’s – and my – participation in the CAC and the Codex committees dealing with issues relevant to the country.

**LOOKING TO THE FUTURE**

Senegal now looks to the future with a great deal more self-assurance. Our work on the national food safety system could become an example for an ECOWAS-wide system and we share our experiences with members of the regional Codex committee. Our consumer organizations are trained and networked and collaborate with the national Codex team for better management and public awareness of food health issues. The NCC has formed a technical secretariat whose members are responsible for supporting the contact point. High-level authorities are aware of the importance of Codex and there is now the political and financial commitment to participate: the Senegalese delegation to the CAC is now consistently headed by a high-level ministerial authority.

CAC41 drew to a close with a social event attended by delegates, FAO and WHO staff, observers and experts. As I chatted in French and practised my English with people from all over the world, I was proud to count myself as one of those experts – and to count my country as an equal within the global family of nations.