



**OIE Regional Seminar on Communication
Consumers and Food Safety Issues
30 October 2008, Bangkok-Thailand**

Food safety is a critical consumers health issue and consumers must be protected against foods and food production processes, which are hazardous to health or life. The growing movement of people, live animals and food products across national boundaries, as well as the rapid pace of urbanization in developing countries, changes in food handling, dietary change and the emergence of new pathogens contribute to greater food safety risks. The relative importance of these risks varies according to climate, food practices, level of income and physical/ social infrastructure. Many of the risks are greater in developing countries where poor sanitation and potable water pose greater consumers health risks than in developed countries.

The food that we consume reaches the consumer through long chains of industrial production and distribution. While opportunities exist for contamination during production and harvest, processing and packing, distribution and final preparation, it is estimated that many cases of foodborne illness occur as a result of improper food handling and preparation by the consumer. Seventy per cent of diarrhoeal diseases are caused by food contaminated with microorganisms and approximately two million child deaths in the developing world annually result from diarrhoeal disease caused by food and water.

Food safety risks related to modern agricultural methods are also on the increase. Pesticide use poses health risks through both direct contacts in farming communities from exposure through farm work and spray drifts and through toxic residues in food and drinking water. Hormones, veterinary drugs and antibiotics are used in animals to treat illnesses or promote growth but can leave residues in foods which end up on consumers' plates. Unhygienic practices in food production; processing, transport and storage can also result in contaminated foods.

Considering the above, Government, food regulatory agencies and industry stakeholders have a fundamental responsibility to communicate best practices for enhanced food safety as well as potential food safety risks. Clear, concise and timely communication on food safety issues is an essential element of integrated approach to food safety. The communication objective is to provide consumers and organizations with appropriate information that contributes to improved food safety practices at all levels of the food continuum (i.e.: inputs, production, processing and consumption).

Implementation of an integrated approach to enhance food safety has resulted in important lessons learned with respect to food safety communication. This includes, food safety communication as an ongoing regulatory responsibility, the need to identify clear communication objectives and to consult with stakeholders as part of ensuring the timely availability of appropriate food safety messages to the right audiences.

In addition to more traditional communication tools, increasing use of the Internet by all is providing a new, practical and economic mechanism for governments to reach consumers and other stakeholders. At the same time, electronic messaging technologies make it easier to reach and to work with the media when time is of the essence. A recent study on this indicates that consumers use social media to share experiences and learn about others.

Consumers International (CI) has established active regional food networks which have continued to increase the exchange of information on food safety matters thereby facilitating action by members at the national level. They have also been crucial in developing and lobbying on CI's positions for the Codex Committees. In terms of the promotion of consumer rights and respect for consumer concerns, CI is expanding its food safety work to include other decision-making bodies at both the national and international levels. CI aims to enhance and develop the work it has been implementing during the past years on food safety by building the capacity of members and their ability to engage, research, campaign and have influence in the area of food safety. Some of the important aspects that needs to be a taken care in ensuring food safety communication to consumers are:

- Food safety communication is an ongoing responsibility;
- The purpose, context and objectives of any communication initiative should be identified and clearly understood otherwise the possibility exists of missed opportunities to deliver timely, effective food safety messages;
- Consultation with and the active participation of stakeholders is an important consideration in the delivery of balanced, credible food safety messages;
- While food safety issues and the implications of regulatory remedies may be complex, all communication with stakeholders needs to be clear, concise and timely;
- Where uncertainties exist in terms of information or the underlying science, food safety communication needs to acknowledge this as part of providing appropriate guidance to consumers and other stakeholders;
- Be pragmatic borrowing the best ideas from others and adapting these ideas is more efficient and effective than starting from scratch and reinventing the wheel; and
- Information on food safety issues should be widely available as appropriate, the use of technology is providing new, practical and economical ways of sharing information with consumers and other stakeholders effective use of the Internet should be an important part of food safety communication strategy.

Submitted by:

R.S.N Sharma
Regional Project Officer
Consumers International
Lot 5-1 Wisma WIM
7 Jalan Abang Haji Openg,
TTDI, 60000 Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia
Tel: (603) 7726 1599
Fax: (603) 7726 8599
Email: satya@ciroap.org
www.consumersinternational.org
www.consumidoresint.org