



1 September 2004

## **DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF FOOD SAFETY AUTHORITIES (INFOSAN)**

**THE NEW INTERNATIONAL FOOD SAFETY AUTHORITIES NETWORK (INFOSAN) IS BEING DEVELOPED TO PROMOTE THE EXCHANGE OF FOOD SAFETY INFORMATION AND TO IMPROVE COLLABORATION AMONG FOOD SAFETY AUTHORITIES AT NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL.**

### **BACKGROUND:**

The rapid globalization of food production and trade has increased the potential likelihood of international incidents involving food contaminated with microbial or chemical hazards. Food safety authorities all over the world have acknowledged that ensuring food safety must not only be tackled at the national level but also through closer linkages among food safety authorities at the international level. This is important for exchanging routine information on food safety issues and to have rapid access to information in case of food safety emergencies. This has both health and trade dimensions, especially since food is one of the most important commodity trade groups. While food safety contacts in some countries are well-known, this is certainly not the case for all countries. As most developing countries are either food exporters or importers, their inclusion in an operational and interactive network is considered essential. The outcome of recent international conferences such as the FAO/WHO Global Forum for Food Safety Regulators in January 2002 and the FAO/WHO Pan-European Conference on food Safety and Quality in February 2002 referred specifically to the need for action in this area, with a focus on developing countries.

In addition, the World Health Assembly (WHA) of WHO has recently adopted two resolutions calling for improved communication among WHO and its Member States on matters of food safety. In May 2000, the WHA adopted a strongly supportive resolution on food safety, including calls for WHO to be more proactive in communicating about food safety. In May 2002, the WHA, in expressing serious concern about health emergencies posed by natural, accidental and intentional contamination of food, requested WHO to provide tools and support to Member States to increase their capacity to respond to such emergencies. In January 2003, WHO published a report on the terrorist threats to food (<http://www.who.int/foodsafety/publications/general/terrorism/en/>) and guidance for establishing and strengthening prevention and response systems. The report identified a food safety emergency network as one of the basic preparedness measures that needed to be taken. In this regard, it should be noted that the food safety emergency network is intended to complement and support the existing WHO Global Outbreak Alert and Response Network (GOARN) (<http://www.who.int/csr/outbreaknetwork/en/>).

In assisting the GOARN Network to combat the international spread of disease outbreaks by rapid identifications, verification and communication of threats, the food safety emergency network will help to minimize the health impact of foodborne outbreaks and prevent further disease spread by an implicated food.

In July 2004, the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission adopted a text entitled *Principles and Guidelines for the Exchange of Information in Food Control Emergency Situations*, which includes the designation of official contact points for information exchange in each country (see the Codex web page: <http://www.codexalimentarius.net/web/reports.jsp?lang=en> for the report of the Codex Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems, Session 12 [Appendix II]). Contact points should be notified to WHO, which is given the responsibility to maintain this list. However, for all intents and purposes, the Codex list of contact points for exchange of information in food safety emergency

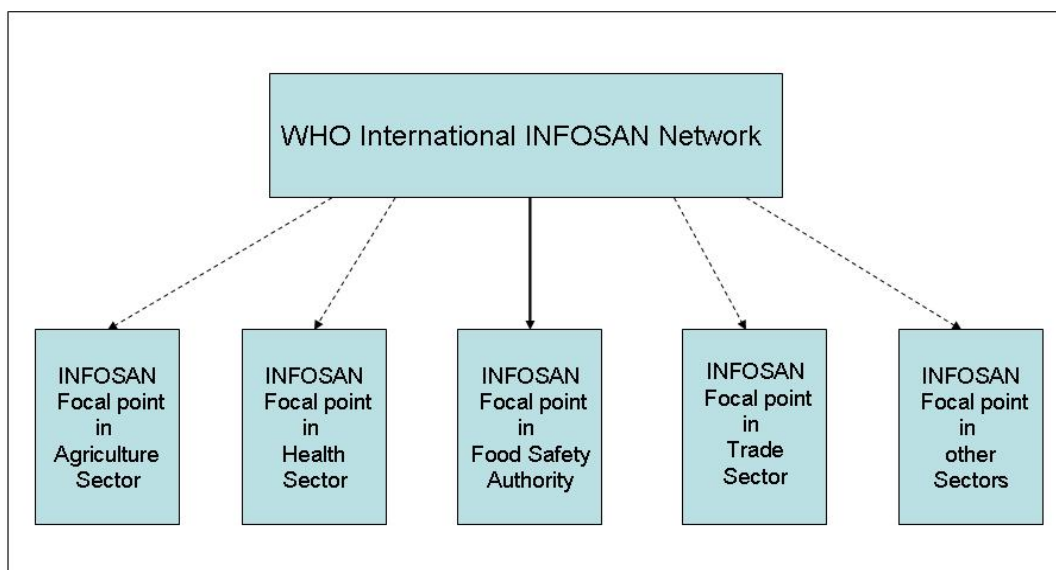
situations is subsumed by the existing list of INFOSAN Emergency Contact Points. In addition, the 36<sup>th</sup> Session of the Codex Committee on Food Additives and Contaminants (March 2004) endorsed the revision of the Codex Guideline Levels for Radionuclides in Foods Following Accidental Nuclear Contamination for Use in International Trade (CAC/GL 5-1989). Finally, the on-going revision of the WHO International Health Regulations also envisages the strengthening of information exchange between national authorities through WHO in cases where food products in international trade may pose serious public health risks. Clearly, reliable and authoritative information on food is essential as the basis not only for prevention and response measures but also maintaining consumer confidence in the food supply.

## INFOSAN AND INFOSAN EMERGENCY:

INFOSAN is an information network with an integrated emergency section: INFOSAN EMERGENCY. Each participating country will have one or several INFOSAN Focal Points that will receive all INFOSAN general information. Each country will have one dedicated INFOSAN EMERGENCY contact point who, in addition to the general information will be activated specifically in major international emergencies involving disease from or contamination in food.

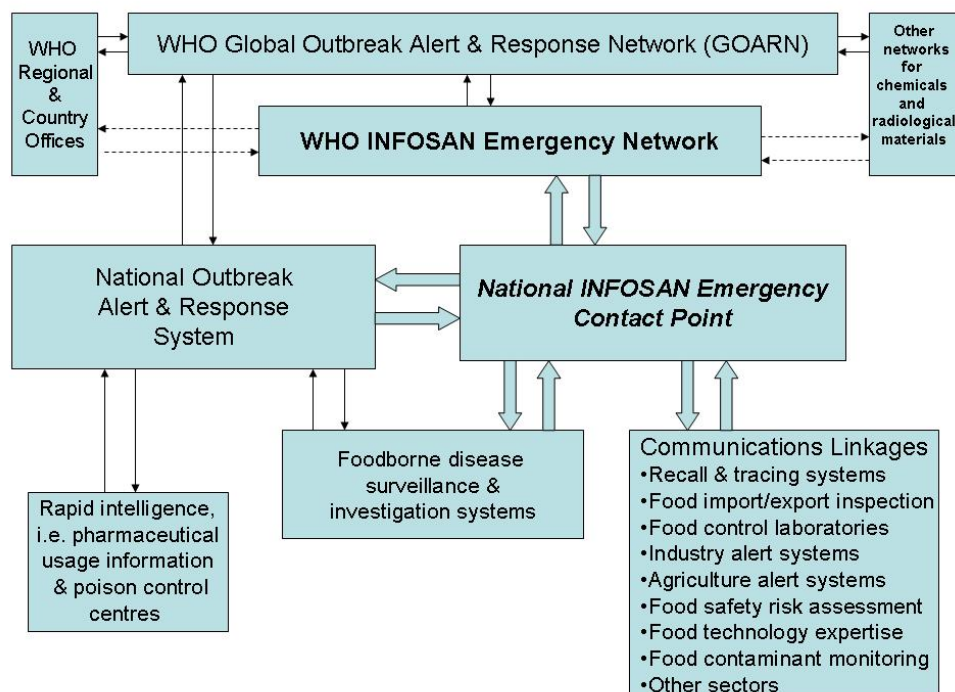
**INFOSAN** will be an information network for the dissemination of important information about global food safety issues. The **INFOSAN** Focal Points will primarily be expected to receive **INFOSAN** information and disseminate it. Several Focal Points for **INFOSAN** may be identified in countries where responsibilities are divided among several agencies.

While it is desirable to have a single Focal Point, several Focal Points for INFOSAN may be identified in a country if responsibilities for food safety are divided among several agencies. Kindly note that the broad definition of *food safety authorities* is those authorities that are involved in food legislation, food control and management, food inspection services, laboratory services for monitoring and surveillance, and information, education and communications, across the so-called farm-to-fork continuum. Therefore Focal Points may be located in several ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, Ministry of Agriculture and Ministry of Trade. See figure below for an example of how this may be structured in a country with multiple Focal Points.



**INFOSAN EMERGENCY** will be used to alert food safety authorities to foodborne disease outbreaks or food contamination events of international significance. **INFOSAN EMERGENCY** will be activated only during major international incidents involving the imminent risk of serious injury or death to consumers

The **INFOSAN EMERGENCY** Contact Point will be expected to accept some notification and response responsibility and to facilitate the communication of urgent messages during food safety emergencies. The Contact Point should also be able to report on behalf of the government information required in the case of an emergency. He/she will have to be *officially* nominated by the responsible ministry. Only one primary Contact Point per country would be designated. Because of the potential sensitivity of the information exchange, communication on this network would be considered confidential. The **INFOSAN EMERGENCY** Contact Point will be automatically part of the **INFOSAN** network as he/she also needs to be kept informed about more routine food safety related activities. **INFOSAN EMERGENCY** will be closely linked to the GOARN Network (<http://www.who.int/csr/sars/goarn/en/index.html>) at both the national and international levels (see figure below).



## PROCEDURE OF DESIGNATION

The designation for both **INFOSAN** and **INFOSAN EMERGENCY** is limited to government entities, or in some cases entities appointed by government.

WHO has contacted its official counterparts in all Member States through the WHO Representative in the countries, to request official designation.

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