



International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN)

October 2007

The International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) was developed by the World Health Organization (WHO) in cooperation with the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), to promote the exchange of food safety information and to improve collaboration among food safety authorities at national and international levels. INFOSAN is operated and managed by WHO's Department of Food Safety, Zoonoses and Foodborne Diseases.

Background

Food safety authorities all over the world have acknowledged that food safety must not only be tackled at the national level but also through closer linkages among national food safety authorities internationally. Food safety problems discovered and managed in one country often are of interest to other countries and through sharing experiences, food safety issues can be managed more effectively and efficiently.

It is therefore important to have a mechanism to facilitate collaboration between countries to exchange information and experiences on both routine and emerging food safety issues. International conferences such as the FAO/WHO Global Forum's one and two for Food Safety Regulators, the FAO/WHO Pan-European Conference on Food Safety and Quality and the FAO/WHO Regional Conference on Food Safety for Asia and the Pacific, specifically identified the need for action in this area, with an emphasis on developing countries.

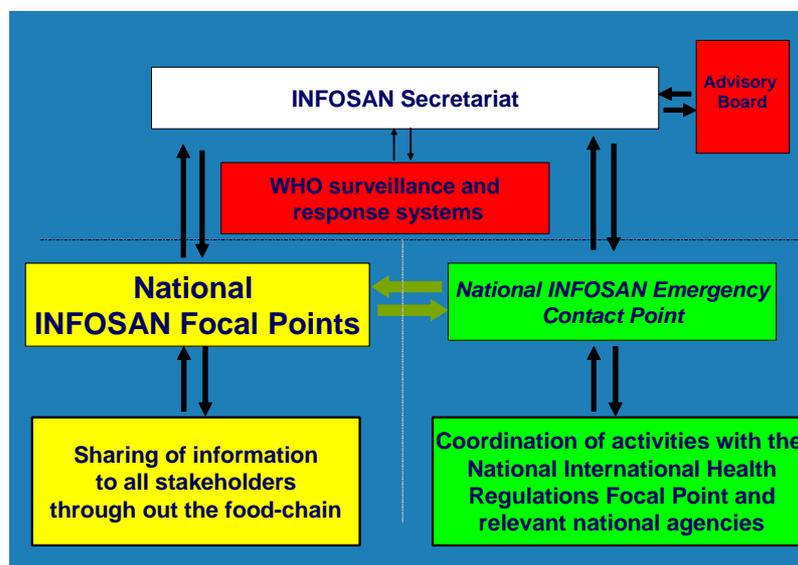
The World Health Assembly of WHO in May 2000 adopted a resolution calling for improved communication among WHO and its Member States on matters of food safety. The 2002 World Health Assembly expressed serious concern about health emergencies posed by natural, accidental and intentional contamination of food, and requested WHO to provide tools and support to Member States to increase their capacity to respond to such emergencies.

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. The Codex text gives WHO the responsibility of maintaining a list of food safety emergency contact points, which is the list of emergency contact points maintained under INFOSAN.

INFOSAN and INFOSAN Emergency

In March 2004, WHO took the first steps in establishing INFOSAN. WHO requested the official designation of one or more INFOSAN Focal Points and one INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point in each Member State. To date, there are over 160 Member Countries in the INFOSAN Network. In June 2006, WHO established an INFOSAN Advisory Group, which now has ten members from National Authorities across the world.

Structure of the INFOSAN Network



INFOSAN is an information network for the dissemination of important information about food safety issues. INFOSAN Focal Points are nominated by countries to facilitate two-way sharing of information. Several Focal Points may be identified in a country if food safety authorities are located in several agencies. In this context, food safety authorities include national authorities involved in food legislation, risk assessment, food control and management, food inspection services, laboratory services for monitoring and surveillance, and food safety information, education and communication, across the farm-to-table continuum. Therefore, INFOSAN Focal Points may be located in several ministries, such as ministries of health, commerce, agriculture and trade.

INFOSAN Information Notes are developed to provide key information on emergent or topical food safety issues. These notes are made available to the INFOSAN Network six to twelve times per year. Examples of INFOSAN Information Notes¹ are as follows:

- Global Early Warning System for Major Animal Diseases, including Zoonoses (GLEWS)
- The identification, assessment and management of food safety events under the International Health Regulations (2005)
- Biomonitoring of Persistent Organic Pollutants (POPs)
- Prevention of Foodborne Disease: the Five Keys to Safer Food
- Food Allergies
- Highly pathogenic H5N1 avian influenza outbreaks in poultry and in humans: Food safety implications

In addition to the INFOSAN Information Notes, INFOSAN members also receive guidelines, questionnaires and the WHO Food Safety Newsletter.

INFOSAN Focal Points are expected to disseminate INFOSAN information to counterparts, stakeholders and other interested parties in their country. The INFOSAN Focal Point also needs to be in a position to consolidate comments from counterparts and return to the INFOSAN secretariat a single response reflecting the national collective view.

INFOSAN Focal Points are asked to contact the INFOSAN secretariat on behalf of their counterparts, stakeholders and other interested parties. Through this mechanism, the INFOSAN Secretariat can provide advice or put the country in contact with another country (via their INFOSAN focal point) that has expertise in the area in question.

INFOSAN Emergency

The International Health Regulations (2005) (IHR(2005)) entered into force on June 2007. The purpose and scope of the IHR(2005) are to prevent, protect against, control and provide a public health response to the international spread of disease in ways that are commensurate with and restricted to public health risks, and which avoid unnecessary interference with international traffic and trade.

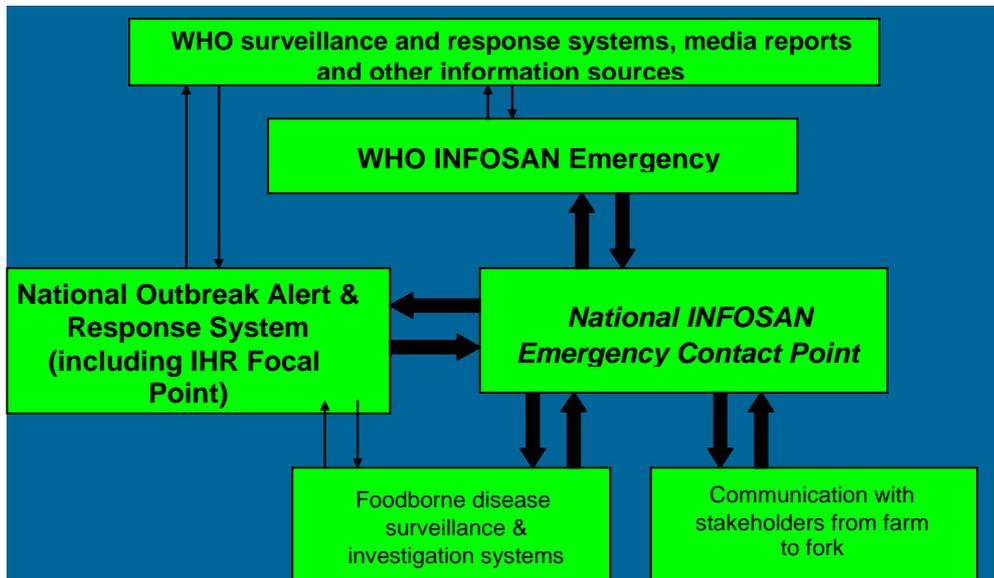
Within the very wide scope of IHR(2005), certain food safety events, including both food contamination and foodborne disease events with international implications, will require action under the legal provisions included in the IHR(2005). INFOSAN Emergency facilitates the identification, assessment and management of food safety events under the IHR(2005)².

INFOSAN Emergency Contact Points are expected to be aware of foodborne disease outbreaks or food contamination events in their country and inform the INFOSAN Secretariat of any events of international public health significance. This process should be undertaken in coordination with the country's National IHR Focal Point. The INFOSAN Secretariat may also request information on events and the INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point is asked to coordinate the response to these queries. Events may relate to microbiological, chemical or physical hazards whether intentional or unintentional. Only one emergency contact point has been requested per country in order to facilitate rapid and reliable communication with governments in cases where timeliness is critical. However, depending upon the nature of a particular incident, an INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point may delegate the responsibility for direct contact with the INFOSAN Secretariat to facilitate communication.

¹ All INFOSAN Information Notes are published at: http://www.who.int/foodsafety/fs_management/infosan_archives/en

² For more information on the IHR(2005) see the INFOSAN Information Note titled: The identification, assessment and management of food safety events under the International Health Regulations (2005)

INFOSAN Emergency Network



INFOSAN Emergency investigates ten to twenty food safety events per month to determine if an alert to the network or specific network members is required. This process usually identifies one to two INFOSAN Emergency Alerts per month to be sent to countries who a) received contaminated food through international distribution or b) may have foodborne disease cases associated with cross-border outbreaks. Examples of INFOSAN Emergency Alerts include: Norovirus in oysters, *Escherichia coli* in Spinach, Melamine and related compounds in ingredients, glass contamination in Oatcakes and *Shigella* in Baby Corn.

INFOSAN Emergency Contact Points are expected to ensure appropriate national response to these INFOSAN Emergency Alerts. Responses may include food recalls, imported food restrictions or consumer announcements. Another function of the INFOSAN Emergency Contact Point is to request assistance from WHO via the INFOSAN Secretariat to respond to national food safety events, if necessary.

Because of the potential sensitivity of the information exchanged, communication on this network is confidential and INFOSAN Emergency Contact Points are officially designated by countries. INFOSAN Emergency operates 24 hours a day, seven days per week and is closely linked with other WHO surveillance and response systems.

Funding

INFOSAN is currently supported by extrabudgetary funds from Member States and non-profit organizations. WHO acknowledges the contribution and support from the governments of Spain, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the United States of America and encourages other Member States to contribute funds to the Network. For further details on how to contribute to INFOSAN, please contact Dr Jørgen Schlundt, Director, Department of Food Safety, Zoonoses and Foodborne Diseases, WHO Tel: +41 22 791 3445 or E-mail: infosan@who.int.

For further details on INFOSAN see: http://www.who.int/foodsafety/fs_management/infosan/en/