

Address by

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At the

Regional Consultation on Safety of Street Foods

***20-23 June 2011,
Bangkok, Thailand***

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Regional Director, WHO South-East Asia*

Distinguished participants, honourable guests, ladies and gentlemen,

On behalf of WHO, I warmly welcome you all to the Regional Consultation on Safety of Street Foods. I thank the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) for agreeing to co-organize this consultation. I thank the Institute of Nutrition, Mahidol University for agreeing to host the meeting. I am happy to note the presence of country participants as well as experienced professionals in the area of food safety. I thank them all for sparing their valuable time to attend the consultation.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The subject for the consultation, “Safety of Street Foods”, is timely and relevant to the situation in many countries in Asia. “Street foods” are foods that are prepared, sold and consumed on the street. Both “street foods” and “fast foods” as we know very well, comprise an extensive range of “ready-to-eat food”. But, “fast foods” are larger “commercial scale products”.

We have long been familiar with “street food”. But not much attention was paid to it. Until recent years, it has been realized that “street foods” also have significant “economic potential”. “Street foods” are available at affordable price, and are available at convenient places for the lower and middle income groups, in particular, for the urban middle class.

Selling of food by “street vendors” generates employment for the unemployed and unskilled. This situation has probably contributed to the rapid growth of the “street foods” sector all over the world in recent years. The proliferation of “street foods” has been noted in developing countries for several reasons, such as - increasing rural-to-urban migration of young people; nuclear families replacing large joint or extended families; rise in the participation of women in the workforce; and a change in the lifestyle of school-going children and office-goers. All these and other reasons have led to an increased dependence on “street foods”. Through different communication media, the local culinary traditions as reflected in many cases by “street foods” are promoted by the tourism sector.

For the past two-and-a-half decades, hygiene and safety of “street foods” has received considerable attention. In 1986, a joint FAO/WHO Expert Consultation recommended that simple measures for the regulation of “street foods” be systematically developed and implemented. The Codex Alimentarius Commission and its subsidiary bodies have discussed the need for a “code of hygiene practices” for “street foods”. They also discussed the need for guidance to governments on food safety measures, including “street foods”.

Over the years, both FAO and WHO have continued to address public health issues relating to “street foods”. The “street foods” sector in developing countries is growing rapidly, and related public health issues and challenges keep emerging. This is in spite of the positive aspect of this growing sector. We need to keep in mind that good hygiene for safe food is difficult to practise at the street level; and that outbreaks of diarrhoea have been often linked to “street foods”.

Food-vending activities on the streets are mostly in the “unorganized” sector of the economy. We know that the quality of foods that are served on the streets are not adequately hygienic; and, therefore, those foods are not safe for human consumption. These foods may cause serious public health problems, in both the short- and long-term; in the short-term, outbreaks of especially “food-borne disease”. On the other hand, the issues of vendors’ identity, their health conditions, and their economic sustainability are also areas of concern.

Some countries in Asia are well aware of these problematic issues and have tried to introduce preventive interventions to minimize the risk of food-borne diseases from “street foods”. However, in most cases, “street foods” are still far from any acceptable standards of hygiene and safety.

In the streets of urban areas and small towns in many of our Member States, vending of foods is carried out with low levels of hygiene and with low levels of food safety standards in place. The chance of large-scale contamination of food items in street vending is very high; but this issue is not properly dealt with by concerned authorities in many cases; and food vendors are often unaware of the food safety regulations.

Overall personal and environmental hygiene is a critical factor to ensure the availability of safe food for consumers. In addition, foodstuff must be safely cleansed.

Water, in particular, is at a high risk of contamination. To ensure safe “street foods”, water used in the preparation of foods and in the cleansing of utensils must be really safe and of high quality.

A comprehensive approach to address this multifaceted sector has now become an important public health challenge. The challenge that needs to be properly and clearly understood. The interventions in this comprehensive approach need to be carefully planned on the basis of evidence from ground reality; and the plan must be implemented strategically.

A recent study by WHO indicated a wide range of diversity in the understanding, management, and monitoring of “street foods” in the Region. Currently, licensing, registration, and safety monitoring of “street foods” vendors are not performed satisfactorily. And food inspectors as well as “street food” vendors are not adequately trained. We need to keep in mind also that tackling the issues and problems relating to “street foods” needs “multisectoral inputs and efforts”.

This consultation is aimed to identify the key elements to ensure our actions towards “safe street foods”. And we aim to develop a roadmap for promoting and strengthening the safety of “street foods” in the Region. I am well aware that these are indeed difficult tasks; but they are really challenging and needed in public health. I am confident that with our combined wisdom and consolidated efforts, the

objectives of the consultation will be successfully met. In this process of our consultation, let us also initiate a linkage of institutions for promoting intercountry cooperation in this important area. If we are successful in this important undertaking, our efforts will substantially contribute to the reduction of morbidity due to food-borne diseases in the Region.

With these words, ladies and gentlemen, I wish the consultation all success.

Thank you.