

21st session of WHO/FAO Coordinating Committee of Asia begins in Goa

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India as the incumbent Coordinator for Asia has inaugurated the 21st Session of the FAO/WHO Coordinating Committee for Asia in Panaji, Goa



Originally being elected in July 2015 and reelected in July 2017 by the Codex Alimentarius Commission, this is the second session of the Coordinating Committee in Asia, hosting delegates from 18 member countries for a 5-day event starting from 23rd Sep – 27th September 2019.

The 21st session of the FAO/WHO Coordinating Committee for Asia will focus on, amongst others, deliberations around food safety at primary production involving issues and best practices for an evolving region; critical and emerging issues related to food safety for the region with an effort to identify focused action areas; exploring possibilities of mutual cooperation and enabling a mechanism for sharing relevant data/scientific advice with other countries for the purpose of developing regional positions and preparing/ supporting new work proposals; and developing regional standards for food products important from regional trade point of view.

In his welcome remarks, Sunil Bakshi, Chair CCASIA and Head, Regulations FSSAI emphasized that the main objective of CCASIA is to promote mutual communication and resource sharing to develop regional standards and regulations for food products and this 5-day event will certainly help us identify a way forward to further strengthen the food safety preparedness in the region as a whole.

Rita Teatua, Chairperson FSSAI said, "FAO/WHO Coordinating Committee for Asia (CCASIA) is a very significant regional coordinating committee which affords its members the opportunity to focus on the concerns of the Asia region with respect to food safety and quality." She further mentioned that this gathering for the 21st Session of CCASIA would pave the way for furthering and ensuring food safety and public health as well as trade and economic development in our region and beyond. "This is a difficult time for trade and globally economies of some significant and very large markets are slowing. Trade tensions and rising protectionism are increasing and in this environment the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) and CCASIA in particular offer us a great opportunity to work together to strengthen both the Codex systems as well as our regional cooperation"

She further emphasized that Asia, as a region, is perhaps, the most diverse of the Codex regions its member countries span from the most advanced countries to amongst the least; sophisticated; highly educated and well-resourced nations to countries grappling with infrastructure and health challenges. With diversity in terms of linguistic, economic and cultural dimensions, Asia, no doubt is one of the fastest growing regions in the world and shares an ancient history of robust trading relations.

"Countries trade extensively with each other and at least in food, almost 60 percent of food trade is within the region. To my view, this alone is enough reason for us to develop a common ground for cooperation. She stressed upon creating a network of scientific and research institutions for collection and assimilation of scientific facts and data for the region and worthwhile, to create an IT enabled information platform to exchange information regarding food frauds and other areas of core interest", she elaborated.

She also highlighted the role of capacity building initiatives between the Codex member countries in Asia. She mentioned that the countries need to pool their resources and provide support to least developed countries in the region. FAO and WHO have taken several initiatives in this direction.

"On behalf of India, FSSAI is happy to offer the capacity we have built-up at the international training centre for food safety and nutrition at Mumbai for such capacity building programs", FSSAI Chair remarked.

Sarah Cahill, Sr. Food Safety Officer, Codex Secretariat mentioned that "Coordinating committees are unique among Codex meetings and the focus of such meetings is not only on standard setting but also to shine a light on various food safety and quality issues in the region. These meetings provide a forum for collaboration & knowledge sharing, for promoting discussions on the new issues emerging on the horizon and then to take critical decisions on setting standards that are central to addressing food safety and quality in the region"

Steve Wearne, Vice-Chair, Codex Alimentarius Commission highlighted that the regional coordinating committees and member countries collectively set the direction and the priorities of Codex".

He further mentioned that "The 21st Session of the Coordinating Committee for Asia (CCASIA) has a very important agenda for a week and I look forward to seeing the results of the deliberations and key analysis to facilitate the continuing discussions on what more Codex can do to ensure our international and national food control systems"

Prof. Purwiyatno Hariyadi, Vice-Chair, Codex Alimentarius Commission appreciated the joint efforts of the coordinating committees to organize these high-level deliberations by involving member countries together at such a platform. He mentioned that the "Asian region should aim to have more such initiatives at the regional level to ensure that key issues unique to the Asia region can be discussed."

Sridhar Dharmapuri, Senior Food Safety and Nutrition Officer, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations highlighted the key essence of two major international conferences on food safety this year – the first was in Addis Ababa, co-organized by FAO, WHO and the African Union with a food control and public health perspective; and the second by FAO, WHO and WTO in Geneva on trade and standards. He further mentioned that "These two high-level events have firmly placed the topic of food safety front and center of the food agenda, alongside ending hunger and tackling the consequences of climate change. Unlike the other two priorities, food safety is under-represented within the SDGs (notably SDG2) but we now have the opportunity to elevate its status on the international development agenda and integrate it as we proceed towards 2030."

Dr. Gyanendra Gongal, Technical Officer, WHO SEARO representing Regional Director Dr. Poonal Khetrupal, WHO SEARO highlighted that standards set by Codex are most comprehensive and is of global relevance and committees play an important role in ensuring health of people and provision of safe food to the population of different member countries. He highlighted that "All countries have a duty to adhere to the Codex standards and guidelines to ensure more coordination amongst the regions. The Codex Trust Fund can ensure promoting capacity building of various countries especially the least developing nations as to strengthen their capabilities".

Rajeev Kumar Jain, Executive Director FSSAI along with other members of the food sector fraternity including the scientific community, industry and industry associations, international organizations and foreign missions, experts and government officials from Central ministries and States were also the part of the inauguration.