International Food Safety Conference opens with call for greater global cooperation

12 February 2019, Addis Ababa – Greater international cooperation is needed to prevent unsafe food from causing ill health and hampering progress towards sustainable development, world leaders said at today's opening session of the First International Food Safety Conference, in Addis Ababa, organized by the African Union (AU), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

A follow-up event, the International Forum on Food Safety and Trade, which will focus on interlinkages between food safety and trade, is scheduled to be hosted by WTO in Geneva (23-24 April). The two meetings are expected to galvanize support and lead to actions in the key areas that are strategic for the future of food safety.

Food contaminated with bacteria, viruses, parasites, toxins or chemicals causes more than 600 million people to fall ill and 420 000 to die worldwide every year. Illness linked to unsafe food overloads healthcare systems and damages economies, trade and tourism. The impact of unsafe food costs low- and middle-income economies around $95 billion in lost productivity each year. Because of these threats, food safety must be a paramount goal at every stage of the food chain, from production to harvest, processing, storage, distribution, preparation and consumption, conference participants stressed.

"The partnership between the African Union and the United Nations has been longstanding and strategic," said African Union Commission chairperson Moussa Faki Mahamat. "This food safety conference is a demonstration of this partnership. Without safe foods, it is not possible to achieve food security," he said.

"There is no food security without food safety," agreed FAO Director-General José Graziano da Silva during his remarks. "This conference is a great opportunity for the international community to strengthen political commitments and engage in key actions. Safeguarding our food is a shared responsibility. We must all play our part. We must work together to scale up food safety in national and international political agendas," he said.

"Food should be a source of nourishment and enjoyment, not a cause of disease or death," said Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, Director-General of the World Health Organization. "Unsafe food is responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths every year, but has not received the political attention it deserves. Ensuring people have access to safe food takes sustained investment in stronger regulations, laboratories, surveillance and monitoring. In our globalized world, food safety is everyone's issue."

"Food safety is a central element of public health and will be crucial in achieving the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals," WTO Director-General Roberto Azevedo said. "Trade is an important force to lift people out of poverty… when we reconvene in Geneva in April we will consider these issues in more depth," he added.

Around 130 countries are participating in the two-day conference, including ministers of agriculture, health, and trade. Leading scientific experts, partner agencies and representatives of consumers, food producers, civil society organizations and the private sector are also taking part.

The aim of the conference is to identify key actions that will ensure the availability of, and access to, safe food now and in the future. This will require a strengthened commitment at the highest political level to scale up food safety in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Changing food systems

Technological advances, digitalization, novel foods and processing methods provide a wealth of opportunities to simultaneously enhance food safety, and improve nutrition, livelihoods and trade.ÂÂ At the same time, climate change and the globalization of food production, coupled with a growing global population and increasing urbanization, pose new challenges to food safety.ÂÂ Food systems are becoming even more complex and interlinked, blurring lines of regulatory responsibility.ÂÂ Solutions to these potential problems require intersectoral and concerted international action.

Strengthened collaboration

A central theme of the conference is that food safety systems need to keep pace with the way food is produced and consumed.ÂÂ This requires a sustained investment and coordinated, multi-sectoral approaches for regulatory legislation, suitable laboratory capacities, and adequate disease surveillance and food monitoring programmes, all of which need to be supported by information technologies, shared information, training and education.