Spotlight:
International Forum on Food Safety and Trade

In April 2019, the WTO welcomed to its headquarters in Geneva over 600 representatives from the private and public sectors and civil society for a two-day International Forum on Food Safety and Trade.

The Forum built on the International Food Safety Conference – organized by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO) and the African Union (AU) in Addis Ababa in February – by bringing a trade angle to the exchanges launched there about the current state and future of food safety and public health. It explored how existing cooperation can be further leveraged to pursue the shared goal of access to safe food. One example of this cooperation is the joint FAO/WHO work in setting Codex food safety standards that are recognised in the Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures as the benchmarks for national food safety measures.

The opening session was attended by WTO Director-General Roberto Azevêdo and his counterparts at the FAO, José Graziano da Silva, the WHO, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), Monique Eloit, together with AU Commissioner Josefa Leonel Correia Sacko.

Harnessing digital technologies
Digital technologies were seen as having a clear role to play in food safety management – for example, in electronic certification or blockchain-supported traceability systems. But the digital revolution must be well governed and inclusive. “There is huge potential in digitalization. New technologies help to gather and analyse data to manage food safety risks. However, this discussion must also be about ensuring that everybody can take part, especially developing countries, as well as the smallest and most vulnerable ones,” DG Azevêdo told the conference.
Tackling food safety risks

The Forum also looked at opportunities and challenges in food safety management from the angle of trade facilitation, following the entry into force in 2017 of the WTO’s newest multilateral pact, the Trade Facilitation Agreement. The synergies between trade facilitation and food safety management are clear and greater efforts must be made to ensure that they complement each other rather than compete. Streamlined and transparent border inspections and controls that help goods move more smoothly make all the difference for perishable food and agricultural products while effectively ensuring that traded food complies with safety requirements.

Solid and harmonized regulatory frameworks must underpin any coordinated response to existing and emerging food safety risks. The discussions looked at how food safety regulatory systems can adapt to new challenges in a harmonized, transparent and timely manner, without losing sight of keeping science as the basis of all work.

Joint initiatives

Joint initiatives, such as the Standards and Trade Development Facility (see page 138), where the WTO, FAO, OIE, the World Bank, WHO and other stakeholders come together to promote solutions to persistent sanitary and phytosanitary trade challenges, can play a crucial part in building capacity and facilitating market access, the conference heard.

A shared responsibility

Food safety is, as it was stressed repeatedly at the Forum, a shared responsibility that cuts across different sectors and requires coordinated policy action and effective partnerships. The Forum made a significant contribution in this respect, emphasizing the importance of broad international engagement.

“Food safety is a shared responsibility … and building strong partnerships … across the public and private sectors is essential,” WTO Deputy Director-General Alan Wolff said in a closing speech to the Forum.