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# **SAMEFOOD**

## **A Mediterranean Network on Food Safety**

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### **I – Background and history**

Food safety is a concern to be approached globally, as international exchanges of foods and feeds and increase steadily as well as the movement of persons between countries, regions and continents. The urbanization of the population and the concentration and specialization of the food chains multiply the potential dimension of food outbreaks, and at the same time concerns on food related risks are strongly conveying societal debates and economic and politic strategies. Costs in terms of health and human losses are enormous as foodborne illnesses are prevalent throughout the world. In this context, the paradigm of risk analysis with the application of a science based approach is emerging since the decade of the 1990's as a rational framework for responding to food safety challenges effectively and efficiently and thus contributing to a reduction in the incidence of food-borne disease and to improve food safety. (FAO and WHO, 2005)

The Mediterranean region is experiencing the same trends and, together with extensive agro-food trade within Europe but also between the EU and the other Mediterranean countries, there are rather different control, regulation, institutional and experience levels in Mediterranean countries and regions regarding risk analysis.

In this context where science plays a fundamental role in applying risk analysis and its basis risk assessment, scientific cooperation between Mediterranean countries and between different research groups working on food safety is undoubtedly a tool that can contribute to food safety, improving the populations' health and preventing food crises and disruptions in the trade system and in the value chain of food products.

The International Centre for Advanced Mediterranean Agronomic Studies (ICAMAS in English or CIHEAM in French), is an intergovernmental Organisation created in 1962 under the auspices of the Council of Europe and the OECD, and it groups 13 countries from the Mediterranean region (.Albania, Algeria, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Tunisia and Turkey), aiming to provide complementary education and develop a spirit of international cooperation among private/public sector executive, academics-researchers and official. CIHEAM has four Mediterranean Agronomic Institutes (MAIs in English or IAMs in French) in Montpellier (France), Chania (Greece), Bari (Italy) and Zaragoza (Spain) which are the organs that mainly develop the mission of the Centre by implementing training and cooperative research programmes.

The Mediterranean Agronomic Institute of Zaragoza (IAMZ-CIHEAM) develops training programmes (Master of Science degrees and short specialised courses) and promotes cooperative research projects and networks in a wide range of topics that can be grouped in the areas of plant and animal production, rural development and environment, fisheries and

aquaculture and agro-food marketing, science and technology. This last working area has been enlarged since 2012 as originally it was restricted to marketing; following this strategic decision of the Institute, the idea of developing a networking action on the area started to materialize with the support of the call of proposals launched the same year by the CIHEAM General Secretariat to create new networks that could contribute to fulfill the objectives of the Centre. Food safety was identified as a topic of high priority that was not specifically covered by the CIHEAM (although punctual training and research activities had been carried out previously), and the first step of the creation of a network, was to invite Dr Vicente Sanchis from the University of Lleida, one of the IAMZ's collaborating experts on food science of the Institute, to debate and draft the network scope and structure and to identify a first activity to launch the initiative. The following step was to organize a coordination meeting in November 2013 in the premises of the Institute, where six relevant experts from five Mediterranean countries and from the European Food safety Authority (EFSA), debated with IAMZ the terms of reference of the Network, proposed a name and an acronym, selected some of the network focal points, and drafted the programme of what was going to be the kick of Meeting of the Network.

Thus, the Mediterranean scientific network on food safety was unofficially created in 2013 and named **SAMEFOOD** (the acronym of **Safe Mediterranean Food**).

As decided in the coordination meeting, a two days' workshop was organized as the launching activity of SAMEFOOD, and was programmed for 10-11 June 2014 entitled "**Food Safety Challenges for Mediterranean Products**". The present volume of *Options Méditerranéennes* publishes the proceedings of the Workshop, attended by 42 persons from 11 countries (Albania, France, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Tunisia and Turkey) and 4 international organisations (EFSA, IAEA, OIE and IAMZ-CIHEAM). The participants were mainly scientists from universities and research centres involved in food safety risk assessment, and also officials from national food safety authorities / departments and international organisations involved in food safety.

Besides the scientific working programme of the Workshop, a networking session was carried out with all the participants, where the original terms of reference of SAMEFOOD were debated, modified and approved, the name of the Network was corroborated, the country focal points were designated the membership was defined, and some possibilities for SAMEFOOD future activities were proposed.

The next sections detail the nature, scope, objectives and structure of SAMEFOOD, developing the decisions taken in the previously defined process of creation of the Network. More information can be found at the website [www.iamz.ciheam.org/samefood](http://www.iamz.ciheam.org/samefood)

## II – Objectives and scope of SAMEFOOD

The general objectives of SAMEFOOD are:

- (i) To strengthen scientific cooperation for food safety in the Mediterranean Basin, focusing especially on North-South and South-South cooperation.
- (ii) To promote a scientifically-based risk approach in food safety risk assessment and communication in the Mediterranean countries.

A number of specific objectives have been defined for the Network in order to achieve the general ones:

- To identify and prioritise common food safety issues.
- To characterise region-specific drivers for emerging risks
- To facilitate the identification of experts
- To exchange information on planned or current activities
- To share data and existing risk assessment studies
- To develop an almanac of food safety governance

- To identify data needs and knowledge gaps
- To enhance capacity building on food safety in the region
- To facilitate and promote debate among stakeholders.
- To cooperate in projects and other joint actions

SAMEFOOD being a scientific network, it will focus on the assessment of risks, one of the three pillars of the risk analysis framework following FAO and WHO definition (FAO and WHO 1995; ). Secondly, risk communication actions can also be developed by SAMEFOOD for disseminating food safety science basis, findings or recommendations.

The Network will deal with issues of food safety risk assessment in the whole food chain, but stress will be placed on emerging risks, outbreaks control and new tools for risk analysis. Challenges and interactions between trade and food safety may be also specific topics to be dealt with, together with issues related to local foods and food safety. Because of its aims and nature SAMEFOOD will refrain from addressing governance, legislation, risk management issues, etc. that are attributions of national and international authorities (Fig. 1).

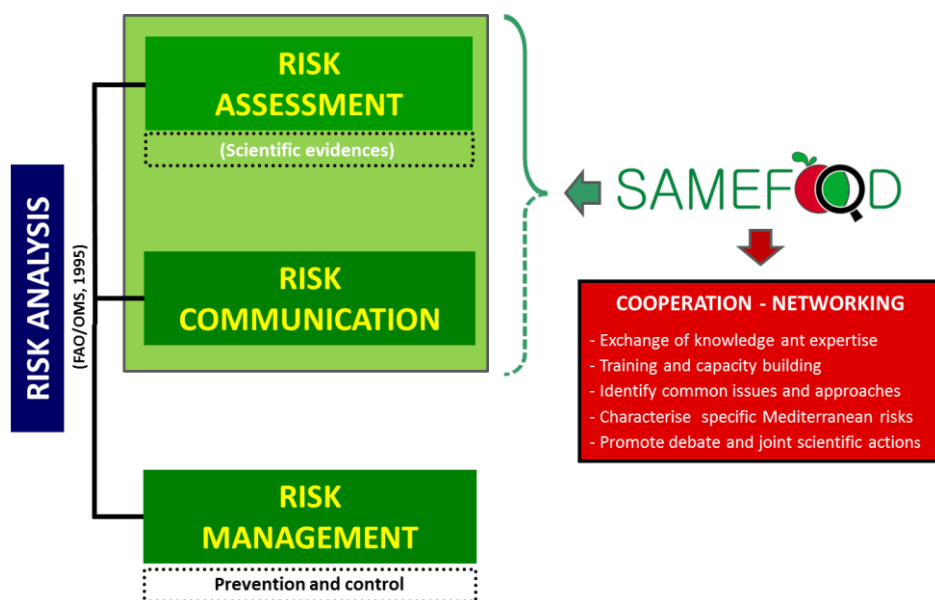


Fig. 1. SAMEFOOD place in the Risk Analysis framework model.

All of the Mediterranean basin countries will be covered, but particularly focusing on CIHEAM members (Albania, Algeria, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Tunisia and Turkey). However, synergies and cooperation may also be sought from other parts of the world.

### III – Structure, management and membership

SAMEFOOD is a network of persons and institutions whose professional interest is Food Safety. Professionals working on research, management, communication and in the private and public sectors on Mediterranean countries and international organizations are welcome.

The SAMEFOOD Network has a **light coordinating structure**. The coordination structure will be composed of a Network Scientific Coordinator, an Executive Committee and the Focal points (Fig. 2).

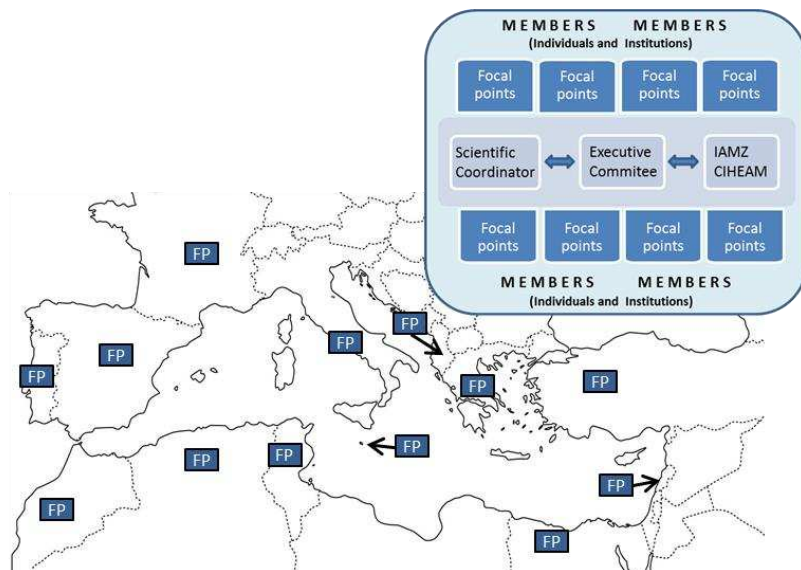


Fig. 2. Structure of the SAMEFOOD Network. FP: focal point.

The **Coordinator** is in charge of:

- (i) management and network monitoring,
- (ii) coordinating the flow of external and internal information,
- (iii) the organisation and direction of the Executive Committee meetings, implementation of decisions of the committee and distribution of minutes,
- (iv) dialogue with the administration,
- (v) where appropriate, providing support documentation for the projects/activities,
- (vi) reporting the situation and progress of the network.

The current coordinator of SAMEFOOD is Dr Vicente Sanchis, professor at the Department of Food Technology at the University of Lleida (Spain).

The **Executive Committee** is composed of five Focal points plus the Network Coordinator and a representative of IAMZ-CIHEAM. Members are selected by aiming at a geographic and thematic balance. The Committee will evaluate proposals of activities made by the network Focal points and other Network members, and will also propose activities for the Network. The activities will be approved on the basis of their interest for the Network and their feasibility (financial and organizational), and the Executive Committee will also be involved in the implementation and monitoring of those activities together with other Network members who might be involved in; ad hoc scientific, organising, editorial or other committees will be established for each activity carried out by the Network.

Each CIHEAM country (Albania, Algeria, Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Lebanon, Malta, Morocco, Portugal, Spain, Tunisia and Turkey) has or will have a **Focal point** or node who is a

person of scientific relevance or someone in an official institution of food safety assessment or management. Focal points in key international institutions may also be part of the structure of the network; for the time being, EFSA and IAMZ-CIHEAM are involved, and it is advisable to have the participation of FAO and WHO. Focal points are not be official country delegates, but rather, persons interested in and committed to establishing contacts at national and international levels for proposing memberships and active in the consecution of the Network activities. Focal points will also propose actions, strategies, projects, etc. and are a key point of the transfer of network actions to their countries institutions.

The IAMZ-CHEAM is strongly committed with SAMEFOOD and will support the management of the Network with one of its officials engaged in its activities. The Institute also holds the website of the Network, and may if resources are available, financially support some of the activities.

**Membership** is open to any person and institution with professional interest in food safety and willing to participate in the Network activities, regularly or occasionally depending on their interest, will, availability of resources and time. Membership can be on an individual level and is, for the moment, free of charge. Members can participate regularly in all Network activities, or choose specific activities depending on their interest, will, availability of resources and time. Institutions can also incorporate as members of the SAMEFOOD network.

## IV – Type of activities foreseen

SAMEFOOD is open to organize, promote and participate in a wide range of activities that fit into its objectives, scope and geographical area of interest. Among the types of activities which SAMEFOOD can be involved in are:

(i) **Training courses.** Short specialised courses on different topics of interest are envisaged. In recent years IAMZ-CIHEAM has organised several specialised courses related to food safety (e.g. “Safety of food of animal origin: meat, poultry and eggs” and “Mycotoxins in cereal food/feed chains: Prevention and control strategies to minimise contamination”). After the establishment of SAMEFOOD, and with the collaboration of some of its experts, courses on Predictive Microbiology (February 2015), the Traceability on the food chain (March 2015) and Bivalve shellfish safety management (September 2015) have been organised. IAMZ programmes its course offer once a year in February, and is willing to organise advanced training courses proposed by the Network.

(ii) **Other Training activities through short exchanges** of researchers between different research groups. i.e. to master specific laboratory techniques, or to meet a certain team and learn of the work they are carrying out.

(iii) **Thematic meetings, symposiums and workshops.** A wide range of topics have been suggested by the Network members: mycotoxins, emergent pathogens, microbial typing methods, inter-regional coordination for risk management for Mediterranean products

(iv) **Data bases and information gathering and exploiting**, in particular an “almanac” on the food safety governance systems of the Mediterranean countries. The country profiles published in the present proceedings are in the line of such an almanac.

(v) Making specific **joint studies** on issues of common interest, publishing joint works, applying to international cooperative research calls, etc.

The structure of the Network with the focal points, is intended to convey information on topics of interest, potential activities, sources of funding, etc., and the activities project will be pursued in case if after positive evaluation of the Executive Committee, enough resources and commitment of persons and institutions is found.

As a general strategy, and if possible, the activities of the Network will be provided in coordination with EFSA and national agencies avoiding duplications. SAMEFOOD will refrain from addressing governance, legislation, risk management issues, etc. that are attributions of national and international authorities.

## V – Conclusion and future of SAMEFOOD

SAMEFOOD has started walking recently and has already carried out some activities, among them the publication of the present proceedings, and it has awoken the interest of many people and institutions beyond participants to the Kick-off Workshop or the courses that IAMZ has organized since then. We believe that institutions and people involved in food safety assessment and management in the Mediterranean countries (research community, assessment agencies and authorities) have an active interest in the objectives of scientific cooperation for which SAMEFOOD was created.

For the time being, new cooperative activities with EFSA are being envisaged, as well as a specific event on mycotoxins to be organised with the Moroccan members of the network. Another activity that we hope will see the light in the mid-term, at least at a small scale at the beginning, is the organisation of short stays of researchers of Southern and Eastern Mediterranean countries in Northern institutions and research groups.

SAMEFOOD lacks its own resources, and although fund raising is not an easy task in this days of crisis and hard concurrence, the fact of relying in a wide network of experts and organisations, and the interest of our partners and of society in general in the aims and topics of the Network permit to be optimistic in terms of continuity of SAMEFOOD. Cooperation with EFSA, that holds a Neighbourhood strategy which matches so well with the SAMEFOOD scope and nature will be probably and hopefully sustained in the future. Attracting other international institutions as FAO or the WHO to cooperate with SAMEFOOD is also one of the priorities. Synergies may also be created with national agencies in charge of food safety interested in cooperating with their homologous neighbour organisations or to benefit from technical training and exchanges. And the academic and research community will with no doubt benefit from the exchange of experiences and training opportunities that SAMEFOOD will try to continue offering in the future. Finally, the previously mentioned commitment of CIHEAM, an institution with more than 50 years' experience in scientific and technical training, research and networking, and providing a huge contact network of experts, organisations, companies and administrations at international level gives undoubtedly some guarantee for the sustainability of SAMEFOOD and its capacity to propose sound activities and play a role in the Mediterranean scientific cooperation on the area of food safety.

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