

## Awilo Ochieng Pernet Calls for Food Safety Champions

To offer a first glimpse of our programme, we have invited Awilo Ochieng Pernet, former chairperson of the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) and pioneer of the World Food Safety Day initiative, to share her reflections. As the keynote speaker, she explores why food safety must be a global priority, where key implementation challenges remain, and how initiatives such as CATALYSE can help translate knowledge into concrete practice.

*“Access to safe and nutritious food is vital to maintain good health and prevent diseases. If it is not safe, it is not food”*, Awilo Ochieng Pernet asserts, highlighting how foodborne diseases cause human suffering and economic burden worldwide, impeding socio-economic development, especially in developing countries. Alarmed by WHO’s 2015 estimates of the global burden of foodborne diseases, which revealed that there are 600 million foodborne illnesses and 420,000 deaths annually, she called for a UN World Food Safety Day to raise global awareness and mobilise multi-sectoral action. Since the adoption of the UN Resolution declaring June 7 as World Food Safety Day in 2018, many food safety advocacy and outreach activities and events have taken place worldwide, although she stresses that more food safety champions are needed.

As CAC Chairperson, Awilo Ochieng Pernet strongly advocated for the active participation of all 189 Codex Members in standards development and decision-making, so that all countries may harmonise their national legislation with Codex standards, since food safety transcends national borders. She prioritised capacity building so that developing countries could gain the necessary skills for effective participation in Codex work. Yet, fundamental challenges still remain due to a lack of resources. *“Codex and food safety capacity building must remain a global priority”*, she insists.

Awilo Ochieng Pernet also draws attention to the challenges related to accessing food safety innovations. In this regard, she notes that science prevents and manages foodborne diseases, while innovations improve food safety practices. However, stakeholders need to be made aware of the existence and value of these food safety innovations so that they can adopt them to improve their food safety practices. Multidisciplinary collaboration can share these openly for everyone’s benefit across the food chain. She notes, however, that many stakeholders, especially in developing countries, cannot catch up with rapid technological advancements and that high costs often limit implementation even when awareness exists. Strong leadership and daily commitment from all relevant stakeholders are therefore essential to building an effective food safety culture.

Awilo Ochieng Pernet praises CATALYSE with its Europe-wide platform for compiling food safety knowledge and innovation in this field, a necessary that bridges the gap with the practice through the targeted dissemination of the relevant information as well as the preparation of appropriate educational materials and training programmes for end-users. *“Food safety is not a privilege for a few but a right for all”*, she reminds us. She strongly invites CATALYSE members and all stakeholders to become food safety champions, committing to sharing knowledge widely and fostering partnerships across the entire food chain.

