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Food safety: a critical part of the food system in Africa

Organised by CTA, ACP Secretariat, European Commission (DG DEVCO and DG Health and Food Safety), Concord and the Global Food Safety Partnership

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1. Introduction

To improve the quantity and quality of food safety capacity building in sub-Saharan Africa, the **Global Food Safety Partnership (GFSP)** commissioned a mapping and analysis of current institutions, initiatives and resources devoted to food safety capacity building in sub-Saharan Africa. The report, "*Food Safety in Africa: Past Endeavors and Future Directions"* provides data, analysis, and recommendations that organizations working on food safety in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) can use to improve the impact of their efforts. The report focuses on food safety capacity-building investments and activities of the international donor community and ways that both donors and African governments can better target and coordinate those investments, with greater synergy between the public and private sectors. **The central theme of this report is that donors, African governments, and the private sector can work together to maximize the impact of food safety capacity-building investments and improve food safety.** Everyone agrees that such collaboration is needed. The difficulty is catalyzing and sustaining a shift in current practices.

The report provides findings and makes recommendations based on data from over 500 donor-funded projects and activities and input from nearly 200 experts and stakeholders. It provides advice to help donors and African governments better target and coordinate investments, with greater synergy between the public and private sectors.

Current donor investment in food safety in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) largely reflects the concerns of previous decades and as a result is substantially focused on access to regional and overseas export markets, with emphasis on national control systems. However, relatively little is being done to reduce foodborne illness among SSA consumers. New understanding of foodborne disease burden and management, along with rapid and broad change within SSA societies and agri-food systems, have led to food safety emerging as an important public health and development issue. There is need to reconsider national government investment strategies and donor support to the same.

The GFSP report supports progress on food safety. It provides up-to-date information on key food safety actors, presents the first ever analysis of food safety investments in SSA, captures insights from a wide-ranging expert consultation, and makes suggestions for attaining food safety, based on evidence but also consensus principles, successful elsewhere but not yet widespread in SSA mass domestic markets.

2. Background

Food safety is linked, directly or indirectly, to the achievement of many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially those pertaining to ending hunger and poverty, and promoting good health and well-being. Food and nutritional security is realized only when essential elements of a healthy diet are safe to eat. Safe food is also vital to the growth and transformation of agriculture needed to feed a growing and more prosperous world population, the modernization of national food systems, and a country's favorable integration into regional and international markets.

According to the estimates made by the WHO Foodborne Disease Burden Epidemiology Reference Group (FERG), in 2010 the global burden of foodborne disease was an estimated 600 million – almost 1 in 10 people in the world – fall ill after eating contaminated food and 420 000 die every year, aggregating to the equivalent of 33 million Disability Adjusted Life Years (DALYs). Food safety related problems still account for almost 2,000 fatalities on the African continent daily. Contamination, diarrhoea and other foodborne illness outbreaks are still very high.

Local incidents can quickly evolve into international emergencies due to the speed and range of product distribution. Serious foodborne disease outbreaks have occurred on every continent in the past decade, often amplified by globalized trade. The situation in sub-Saharan Africa is no different as the recent Listeriosis outbreak in South Africa showed. Unsafe food poses global health threats, endangering lives everywhere.

As the world's population grows, the intensification and industrialization of agriculture and animal production to meet increasing demand for food creates both opportunities and challenges for food safety. Climate change is also predicted to impact food safety, where temperature changes modify food safety risks associated with food production, storage and distribution.

Globalization has triggered growing consumer demand for a wider variety of foods, resulting in an increasingly complex and longer global food chain.

These challenges put greater responsibility on governments, food producers and handlers to ensure food safety. Facilitating global prevention, detection and response to public health threats associated with unsafe food is a priority across Africa. Ensuring consumer trust in their authorities and confidence in the safe food supply is a benefit for all actors of the value chain.

3. Ensuring food safety in a more complex environment

Food can become contaminated at any point of production and distribution, and the primary responsibility lies with food producers. Yet a large proportion of foodborne disease incidents are caused by foods improperly prepared or mishandled at home, in food service establishments or markets. Not all food handlers and consumers understand the roles they must play, such as adopting basic hygienic practices when buying, selling and preparing food to protect their health and that of the wider community.

Millions of smallholder farmers, many of them women, supply the rapidly growing markets for livestock and fish products in Africa. In sub Saharan Africa, more than 80% of animal products are sold through informal markets, which lack structured sanitary inspection.

In most countries[1] either no regulatory measures/infrastructure are in place to assure food safety in informal markets, or the regulations are derived from industrialized countries and are anti-poor and unworkable. Typically, multiple institutions have mandates for food safety through various regulations or acts targeted to various stages and activities in the food chains. Some important public health hazards are believed to be common in food but few are regularly surveyed; the actual status of many important health hazards is unknown. Most food in the traditional/informal sector is not inspected. Where some inspection occurs, it does not follow a 'farm to fork pathway' approach.

African governments, the African Union and the United Nations (through the Sustainable Development Goals) have all recognized the central role that market-driven agriculture and value added agri-businesses must play in Africa's development and in the struggle to achieve food security for all its people. This means supporting African farmers and food companies in building viable commercial operations and taking advantage of the growing demand for food, not only in their local rural communities but also in and around Africa's rapidly growing cities and in global markets outside Africa.

In this context, policy-makers should build and maintain adequate food systems and infrastructures (e.g. laboratories) to respond to and manage food safety risks along the entire food chain, including during emergencies and foster multi-sectoral collaboration among public health, animal health, agriculture and other sectors for better communication and joint action.

While food safety is a fundamental social value in its own right – for public health and as a recognized element of food security – it is also a prerequisite for market access and commercial success in today's global food system. The world is moving toward elevated and harmonized food safety standards that reflect modern best practices, a process that will continue in response to consumer and market demands and that will affect farmers and food companies worldwide. This elevation of standards potentially puts

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[1] Grace, D., Kang'ethe, E., Bonfoh, B., Roesel, K. and Makita, K. 2014. Food safety policy in 9 African countries. Presented at the 4th annual Leverhulme Centre for Integrative Research on Agriculture and Health (LCIRAH) conference, London, UK, 3-4 June 2014. Nairobi, Kenya: ILRI.

at a competitive disadvantage, however, food producers in developing countries where the capacity to meet those standards is lacking.

4. Policy engagement in favor of food safety in Africa

Food safety policy refers to the structures put in place to ensure that food is handled, prepared and stored in a way that minimizes contamination risks. It is a pertinent global issue as foodborne illnesses account for a high number of casualties. Food hygiene regulations aim to prevent food poisoning cases. They involve equipment and surface sanitizing, high personal hygiene levels, effective pest control and proper storage and heating. While there are general guidelines applied across the global divide, some aspects set apart regional regulations in different locations.

Industry stakeholders from the growing, processing and foodservice/retail sectors are using cold chain systems, Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) and other food safety management systems (FSMSs) such as the newly established ISO 22000 as models to achieve food safety to enhance trade opportunities in international markets. Advanced knowledge of food hazards has resulted in new regulations, which includes mandatory HACCP system implementation in processing plants in several countries. Food laws aim to protect consumers' interests, their well-being, and to a degree, facilitate fair trade.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex) was founded by **FAO and the World Health Organization** in 1963, with the mandate to develop international food standards in order to protect the health of consumers and ensure fair practices in food trade. Members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) recognize Codex Alimentarius standards as the basic standard upon which national measures will be judged.[2]

The **World Health Organisation (WHO) Food Safety Programme** supports Member States to develop, implement, monitor and evaluate policies, strategies and programmes to address all food safety and nutrition problems, towards attaining the highest possible level of food safety and optimal nutrition.
The International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN) was developed by WHO and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) to rapidly share information during food safety emergencies.[3]

Now that most African countries are embracing international trade, they are paying a lot more attention to food safety. The **African Union (AU)** is formulating a promising project towards a common food standards framework focusing on minimizing public health risks and getting consumers to trust the local food system.

The basic principles for the **EU's food safety policy** are defined in the EU's General Food Law, adopted in 2002. Its general objectives are to facilitate the free trading of food across all EU countries by ensuring the same high level of consumer protection in all Member States. The EU food law covers all parts of the food chain from animal feed and food production to processing, storage, transport, import and export, as well as retail sales. The EU food law also establishes the principles for risk analysis. These stipulate how when and by whom scientific and technical assessments should be carried out in order to ensure that humans, animals and the environment are properly protected. This common approach ensures that minimum standards apply throughout the EU. It helps EU countries to prevent and control diseases, and to tackle food and feed safety risks in a coordinated, efficient and cost-effective manner.[4]

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The **implementation** of this **[integrated Food Safety policy in the EU](5)** involves various actions, namely:

- to assure **effective control systems** and evaluate **compliance with EU standards** in the food safety and quality, animal health, animal welfare, animal nutrition and plant health sectors within the EU and in third countries in relation to their exports to the EU;
- to manage **international relations** with third countries and international organisations concerning food safety, animal health, animal welfare, animal nutrition and plant health;

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[2] Codex Alimentarius. FAO-WHO. http://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/en/
[3] WHO Africa. Food Safety Programme. https://www.afro.who.int/health-topics/food-safety
[4] From farm to fork: safe and healthy food for everyone. EU. 2014.
[5] Food Safety in the EU. https://europa.eu/european-union/topics/food-safety_en

- to manage **relations with the [European Food Safety Authority (EFSA)](#) and ensure science-based **risk management**.

To succeed in international trade, and in particular trade to Europe, African exporters need to have a very good knowledge of these regulations and the capacity to implement them, delivering the quality required by the targeted markets. Failing to do that can result in the loss of valuable markets.

Food safety-related legislation is continually under review as it needs to reflect new knowledge, technical innovation and changes in the pattern of the distribution. As a result, national regulatory authorities throughout the world are in a constant catch-up mode. Similarly, international food safety standard-setting bodies look to address current issues and to develop guidelines on systems and methods that will help streamline food safety best practices within and between nations.

5. The way forward

In many African countries, the capacity gap includes lack of effective public policies and institutions to provide regulatory oversight; insufficient extension services, research, and other technical assistance for producers; too few trained people to carry out food safety activities in both the public sector and in small-and-medium-size enterprises (SME's) and lack of cold chain facilities, food testing laboratories and other physical infrastructure. These gaps – and the resulting questions about food safety – result in costly illnesses and death for domestic consumers, who rely heavily on informal markets for their food, jeopardize market access and thus economic success for African farmers and food companies.

It is critical to strengthen regulatory frameworks, establish and implement effective food safety systems that ensure that food producers and suppliers along the whole food chain operate responsibly and supply safe food to consumers.

- Recommendations of the GFSP study

New evidence shows the huge health and economic burden of foodborne disease. SSA has the world's highest per capita health burden, which disproportionately affects children and undermines the well-being and economic productivity of the whole population. Food safety also underpins the region's agriculture-led development strategies, including the 2014 Malabo Declaration goal of dramatically increasing trade in food.

Complexity, dynamism and diversity of the food system hinder capacity to plan and target investments but offer opportunities for agri-food system development. Key elements include: predominance of smallholders and diversity of foods; many hazards and limited understanding on their presence, prevalence and contribution to health risks; diverse rapidly evolving formal and informal, domestic and export markets; infrastructure challenges; complex, underfunded, but modernizing governance systems; emerging consumer awareness and market demands for food safety that vary widely among countries and between formal and informal markets.

International donor organizations are, and have been, major providers of food safety capacity investments. The report documents over 30 bilateral and multilateral agencies, development banks, and foundations. Although, goals, priorities, and strategies have been largely uncoordinated, investments have been appreciated by stakeholders who also see opportunities for re-orientation of investments towards greater impacts. Current donor investment in food safety remains substantially focused on access to regional and overseas export. Much of this donor investment involves activities that are not linked to health outcomes in SSA. The focus reflects priorities that dominated in past decades, which still have relevance but are no longer enough to address broad food safety needs.

National governments and donors should consider a new approach to capacity building. In keeping with best practice, this should have increased public health focus and investment and greater emphasis on harnessing consumer awareness and market forces to drive progress. Export-oriented capacity building remains relevant, but investments need to be shifted, broadened, brought up to date, prioritized and justified. Specific recommendations and their rationale are:

(a) Better address the health of domestic consumers dependent on informal markets: Most of the health burden of foodborne illness in SSA is borne by the majority who depend on informal markets,

where only a small fraction of donor investment has focused. While evidence is good that the health burden is huge, there is a lack of data on the impacts of specific hazards required for prioritization and on the range, effectiveness and cost of intervention options.

Recommendation. Citizen health should be at the heart of national food safety systems. SSA national governments and regional institutions, in dialogue with the donor community, should establish health-based goals, priorities, metrics and implementing strategies and help generate the missing evidence needed for rational planning.

(b) Build capacity for well-governed, evidence- and risk-based food safety systems: Risk-based approaches to food safety management are increasingly the norm among governments and firms producing for formal markets: approved by SSA governments, they have yet to be implemented in the informal sector. They provide structured and efficient ways of mitigating risk (such as farm to fork management) but require adaption for informal markets and an enabling regulatory environment. Lack of donor co-ordination and underfunded, fragmented and often poorly governed national food safety systems, contribute to regulatory failure and a significant gap between food safety policy, and implementation in most SSA countries.

Recommendation. National governments should endorse principles of science- and risk-based prevention, adapted to local conditions. SSA governments together with donors should mutually commit to improving food safety governance. These include: SSA country ownership of building food safety; government commitment to improving institutions and tackling corruption; donor harmonization and alignment with national priorities; and, managing for results and mutual accountability.

(c) Harness marketplace drivers of progress on food safety. Improvements in food safety have been mostly the result of public demand. In SSA, a "push" approach still predominates, focusing on the public sector and trade goals. In contrast, "pull approaches" use consumer demand for safe food as the major lever for improvement, while supporting the private sector to respond to this demand. The public sector provides enabling regulatory environment that supports private efforts and increases awareness of food safety among all stakeholders.

Recommendation. National governments, donors and the private sector should use their resources and standing to recognize, catalyze, and support the consumer and marketplace drivers of progress on food safety. This requires well-informed and empowered consumers, able to demand food safety and a private sector that has capacity and accountability to respond to consumer demand.

Objectives of the Briefing: To improve information sharing and promote networking, CTA, the DG DEVCO from the European Commission, the ACP Secretariat, Concord and various media organise since 2007 bimonthly briefings on key issues and challenges for agriculture and rural development in the context of EU/ACP cooperation.

The Global Food Safety Partnership (GFSP) is joining us in organising this Briefing. The GFSP an innovative, public-private initiative dedicated to supporting and promoting global cooperation for food safety capacity building. GFSP is uniquely able to assess food safety systems and propose systems-based interventions to address specific food sector needs and to prioritize hazards and threats.

Collaborators include leading food and beverage multinationals, intergovernmental organizations, government agencies, global industry organizations, bilateral and multilateral organizations. The work of GFSP is focused on low- and middle-income countries that benefit from the expertise and resources leveraged from among GFSP donors and other stakeholders.

Target group: Around 150 ACP-EU policy-makers, civil society groups, research networks, development practitioners, private sector representatives and international organisations based in Brussels.

Outputs: A short report and a Reader in printed and electronic format will be produced shortly after the meeting. Input and comments before, during and after the meetings will be included in the Briefings Website: http://brusselsbriefings.net.