Developing National Food Safety Policies and Legislation

Food safety is an area in which there is both an individual and governmental role. As individuals we need to store, prepare and cook food in a hygienic manner. However, the food supply chain has become more complex. It is the role of governments to ensure that the supply chain operates in a manner which does not put health of the ultimate consumer at risk. The establishment of an effective food control system is the key element in the process. And a key part of the system is the creation and implementation of a modern food law.

What is a national food safety policy?

A food safety policy provides a basis for the establishment of national food safety objectives and requirements, and guidance for application to specific sectors of the food continuum (production, processing, storage, transportation and marketing).

Food safety laws and regulations are essential for providing the legal framework for establishing an effective food control infrastructure. Whilst also encompassing other consumer protection issues such as fraud, food law serves as a mechanism for formalizing and codifying strategies and policies. It is an important means by which policies are enforced.

Why develop a national food safety policy?

A survey report in the African Region noted that food legislation that is in line with international requirements such as the Codex is lacking in many African countries. Enforcement of food legislation is also problematic, often resulting in an insufficient consumer protection against fraudulent practices and contaminated food products, and leading to the

importation and domestic production of sub-standard food exports from the Region.

The development of relevant and enforceable food laws and regulations is an essential component of a modern food control system.

**The process of policy development**

The process of developing food safety policies involves three interlocking stages, comprising:

- **Development of the policy**, which includes the purpose of determining the need for policy development, drafting and promulgating the national food safety policy;
- **Implementing** the policies;
- **Monitoring the performance and implementation** of the policy.

The aim of the policy formulation process should be to identify and recommend a policy for the long-term management and control of food safety that commands consumer confidence and ensures public health.

**Food legislation**

Food legislation should include the following aspects: ²

- It must provide a *high level of health protection*;
- It should include *clear definitions* to increase consistence and legal security;
- It should be based on *high quality, transparent, and independent scientific- advice* following risk assessment, risk management and risk communication;
- It should include provision for the use of *precaution and the adoption of provisional measures* where an unacceptable level of risk to health has been identified and where full risk assessment could be performed;
- It should include provisions *for the right of consumer to have access to accurate and sufficient information*;
- It should provide for *tracing of food products and for their recall* in case of problems;
- It should include clear provisions indicating that *primary responsibility for food safety and quality rests with producers and processors*;
- It should include *obligation to ensure that only safe and fairly presented food is placed on the market*;
- It should also *recognize the country’s international obligations* particularly in relation to trade; and
- It should *ensure transparency in the development of food law and access to information*.

**WHO technical support in food safety policy development**

At the fifty-seventh session of the Regional Committee for Africa, a Regional Strategy on Food Safety and Health was endorsed. Priority interventions include among others the formulation of food policy and regulations.

To provide assistance to Member Countries in developing food safety policies and legislation, Regional guidelines have been developed for the formulation and implementation of food safety policies and legislation.

Continued efforts are being made in assisting countries to review and/ or update/formulate national food safety policies as well as develop and disseminate technical guidelines and tools related to policy formulation, implementation and capacity building.
