

NETWORKING FOOD SAFETY INFRASTRUCTURE FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL STRATEGY FOR ENSURING FOOD SAFETY

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India has made considerable progress in the agricultural sector in the last three decades. However, commensurate with the increase in food production in the agriculture, horticulture, veterinary or aquaculture sectors, the quality of the foods produced has not improved. The deterioration in quality was mainly due to the various

- Biological hazards, arising from the bacterial, viral, fungal and parasitic contamination;
- Chemical hazards through naturally occurring toxins inherently present in the foods or those arise out of microbial activity such as bacterial, fungal and algal toxins, as well as from chemicals such as residues of pesticides and veterinary drugs and
- Physical hazards like mud, stone, wood, glass and plastic.

The quality of the foods produced has considerable significance on the food safety scenario in the country, from both the health and socio-economic perspectives. The health aspects include the various foods and feed borne disease outbreaks that occur frequently in humans and animals in different parts of the country. The socio-economic implications include the decreased market access because of inferior quality of produce, lesser monetary returns, post harvest losses, failure to comply with regulation and consequent export rejections and loss of reputation.

The problem of food quality and safety are dynamically, generatively and socially complex and need a holistic and systematic approach to solve the issues. It is dynamically complex because the cause and effect are separated in time and space. For example, the deterioration of quality at the farm level may some times

becomes obvious later when export rejection occurs. It is generatively complex because the dimensions are fundamentally unfamiliar. The traditional social, cultural and economic milieu is changing rapidly in the modern globalization and economic liberalization era of the digital world. The problem is socially complex because it involves people of different strata of the society with different views, beliefs and interests. The perspectives of the stakeholders are, therefore, different. A multi stakeholder process is required for solving the issues. Thus, there is a need for holistic, creative, multistakeholder processes that are systematic and generative. It is in this context, a new bold initiative is needed to develop and implement a national strategy for ensuring food safety that includes appropriate control systems, systematic and sustainable preventive measures. For this purpose, integrating food safety matters among the stakeholders throughout the food chain of farming, production, processing, storage and distribution with appropriate control measures of domestically produced and exported and imported foods is essential. It should result in the health benefit of reducing the occurrence of food borne illnesses and bring better economic returns. It should also minimize export rejections, improve the image of the country and increase the productivity by means of minimizing losses of foods because of quality factors.

Over two decades ago, a workshop on National Strategy for Food Quality Control was organized in Hyderabad, which stressed the need for a strategy, defined its objectives and recommended the establishment of a National Food Quality Control Board. Subsequently, several attempts were made to restructure the existing system of food control, but with no improvement in the scenario. A workshop organized by the Nutrition Foundation of India

and the FAO on National Strategy for ensuring Food Safety in December, 2003, recommended the establishment of a Food Safety Regulatory Authority/Commission with appropriate mechanisms of coordination, risk analysis systems of risk assessment, risk management and risk communication, regulatory impact assessment as well as international relations and obligations. A food quality literacy movement was also envisaged and Dr C. Gopalan presented the recommendations of the workshop to the Prime Minister of India personally on March 3, 2004. Now a new movement needs to be initiated to implement these strategies that have been evolved.

National Food Quality Literacy Movement

The salient features of the movement are:

Vision

To improve the quality of foods produced through agriculture, animal husbandry and aquaculture in India.

Mission

To create awareness on food safety and quality issues among stakeholders, such as food producers, processors, handlers, exporters and consumers.

Strategy

To enhance the capability and build capacity for improvement of food safety and quality by networking and building alliances among existing institutions of the government and associations of industry, farmers and consumers.

Tasks

Increase awareness of health risks associated with consumption of unsafe foods and economic benefits of producing and marketing foods of good quality.

This will include:

- Documentation of various methods of improving the quality and safety of foods.
- Preparation of materials needed to spread the message among the stakeholders.
- Conducting training programmes for

various functionaries from farm/pond to plate HACCP approach.

- Carrying out extension activities through mass media, both visual and print as well as information technology services.
- Undertaking measures to prevent and reduce the exposure to various toxins, contaminants and adulterants.
- Promoting legal compliance at national and state levels on quality issues.
- Increasing liaison with international agencies such as WTO and Codex Alimentarius Commission systems and other agencies like EU authorities, US Food and Drug Administration and SAARC and other regional bodies.

Organizations to be networked (Table):

- Academic and Research Institutions such as BARC, CFTRI, NIN, ITRC, IARI, IVRI, NDRI and CARI.
- Agricultural Financial Institutes such as NABARD.
- Developmental Agencies such as APEDA, MPEDA and EIC.
- Commodity Board such as NDDB, Coffee Board, Tea Board and Spices Board.
- Central and State agencies and local level cooperative institutions like NAFED, various oilseed cooperative federations, TRIFED and GCC.
- Trade Associations such as FICCI, CII, ASSOCHAM, FH and RAI and others.
- State and central government department of agriculture, horticulture and fishery, marketing federations, various missions such as Oilseed, Horticulture and Bee.
- Farmers groups.
- Leading civil society organizations such as MSSRF, NFI.
- Professional Societies like NSI, AFST, and OTRI.

Round table discussion

In order to have a wider consultation and generate ideas for planning action programme

Table: Sectors, Organizations and Target Groups

Sector	Target groups	Organization involved / places of implementation
Agriculture	Farmers group who produce high risk foods, milk and milk products, fish, poultry, meat, raw vegetables and export produce	Agricultural universities. agriculture produce market yards.
Industry	Professional food handlers including those in the manufacturing of processed foods in factories and cottage industries and those who handle, prepare, serve food in cottage industries, food and catering establishments, retail outlets, supermarkets, street food vendors.	Home science colleges, catering and hotel management institutions, industry federations, trade association, professional associations like AFST, NSI, IDA, certifying agencies, consultancy organization.
Tourism	Airlines, Railways, Hotel, Restaurant.	Catering and hotel management school
Health	Domestic Food handlers particularly mothers, small children, pregnant women, lactating women.	Maternal and child health clinics, hospitals, PHC, health practitioners, nursing schools, medical colleges, food and health inspectors, primary school teachers training colleges.
Religious Organization	Temples, Gurudwaras	Temple trusts, religious institutions.
Community	Street foods	Local bodies like municipalities/panchayat, consumer organization, other NGOs.

for implementation, a round table discussion needs to be organized. At this meeting, attended by representatives of most stakeholder's, a shared map of the emerging reality of the system could be drawn.

Advisory Council

The Movement will have an advisory council composed of prominent senior eminent scientists of international stature like Dr. M.S.Swaminathan, Dr. C. Gopalan and Dr. S. Varadarajan.

Core teams and sub teams

The core team members shall be drawn from organizations that are actively involved in the movement, who have across the board interest in the area of food safety and quality. Proper representation of different sectors, such as developmental organizations (e.g. APEDA), financial institutions (NABARD), research councils (ICAR) and prominent civil society organizations (e.g. MSSRF, NFI) will be ensured. The sub team members shall be drawn from sectoral and specific commodity organizations such as horticulture, coffee board.

Secretariat

The Secretariat, headed by an Executive Director, and supported by a limited support staff could be established. It will handle project

management, coordination, logistics administration and communication. It will also handle design, facilitation, documentation and to some extent teaching.

Funding

Funding for the partnership would be and large through the existing organizations mentioned earlier, who have a vested interest in ensuring the safety and quality of the foods produced in the country and will readily invest money, time and energy for the cause. However, there is a need to motivate and provide the necessary technical support on vital issues related to food safety and quality. For this purpose, there is a need for a Central Secretariat led by an Executive Director, supported by minimal staff, who will handle project management, coordination, logistics, administration, documentation, training and communication. This could be in the form of a five-year project with appropriate budget allocation for five years. The budget would take care of salaries of personnel, production of communication materials, documentation, travel and contingencies.

Examples of some of the work initiated so far include:

- Initiative of the Directorate General of Health Services, Ministry of Health,

Government of India to prepare curricula on Food Safety and its incorporation in the curricula of various courses of the National Council of Catering and Hotel Management and other hospitality industry schools.

- The School of Continuing Education of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi had started an on-line Food Safety Certificate Programme from June 2004.
- The launching of HACCP movement to ensure food safety by the Federation of Hotel and Restaurant Association of India during mid 2004.
- Initiative of Dr. M.S.Swaminathan Research

Foundation along with The Hindu Media Research Centre, in Chennai to organize a Media Workshop on food safety in latter half of 2004.

Conclusions

The practical approaches that have been suggested need to be carried out with a spirit of partnership among various stakeholders. The initiative needed to be taken up by the government involving the various stakeholders in the quasi government, cooperative, industry, civil society groups with the cooperation of primary producers, secondary processors and above all the consumers.