



ENHANCING FOOD TRADE, AND FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY IN THE IGAD REGION THROUGH IMPROVED FOOD SAFETY CONTROL

THE NEED FOR URGENT ACTION

FOOD SAFETY AS INSTRUMENT TO IMPROVE PUBLIC HEALTH AND FOOD AND NUTRITION SECURITY

Food must be safe to not pose health threats to consumers or act as a barrier to trade and also to allow smooth functioning of the overall agri-food system that underpins economic development and food and nutrition security. However, as revealed in the World Health Organization report (WHO, 2015), Sub-Saharan Africa is home to the world's highest per capita health burden posed by foodborne diseases, which disproportionately affects children with lasting impacts on their well-being and economic productivity.

The problem also negatively affects the region's capacity to be competitive in regional and global agri-food markets. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that an annual average of 91 million people consume contaminated food that renders them ill, and around 137,000 people die as a result of consuming contaminated food in Africa. This reveals the need for more aggressive and strategic interventions to address the problem.

The First International Food Safety Conference held in Addis Ababa (Ethiopia) in February 2019 also agreed on many policy areas that include integrating food safety into national and regional food policies as a means to achieve the 2030 SDG Agenda. Similarly, the IGAD's 2016-2020 regional strategy identified a plan to continue providing a forum for development and harmonisation of policies that promote trans-boundary interventions such as intra-regional trade in food commodities.

The strategic document also indicates that in the medium- and long-term, IGAD will focus on developing and harmonizing the policies, procedures and standards necessary to foster an increase in trade among the Member States. One of the outcomes of the IGAD's Investment Priority Areas (IPAs), as described in the IGAD Regional Agriculture Investment Programme (RAIP), is improving governance of agricultural trade through various means, including promotion of harmonized food safety and sanitary standards.

Nevertheless, despite the various documents mentioned above and the growing recognition of the potential role of food safety in the wider development context of Africa, the state of food safety in the region still remains an important issue of concern because of the challenges undermining food safety in the region. Without adequately addressing the challenges, IGAD Member States will not be able to effectively attain the objectives set in the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) agreement as well as in materializing IGAD's objectives as outlined in their strategies.

In addition to improving public health by reducing foodborne related illnesses and deaths, improving food safety in the IGAD region can help to unleash the potential role of agri-food systems and regional food trade to enhance food security

The 14th Annual Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme Partnership Platform meeting (CAADP PP) held in 2018 underscored the importance of improving food safety and quality standards in Africa to avoid the health burden from food borne diseases and also to improve the competitiveness of African agriculture and food trade.

I. NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEVEL CHALLENGES UNDERMINING FOOD SAFETY IN THE IGAD REGION

National level challenges: Policy, legislative, and coordination gaps

FAO and WHO advise countries to establish national food safety control systems with five main building blocks. These are the Food Policies and Legislation (Laws, Regulations and Standards); Food Control Management; Food Inspectorate Services; Food Laboratory Services; and Food Information, Education, Communication and Training. National food safety policies and legislation are important prerequisites for formulation and enforcement of effective food safety measures.

Such policies and legislation are expected to define the roles and responsibilities of each sector and actors along the food chain. Countries are also advised to base their food safety regulations and standards on texts and recommendations made by the Codex Alimentarius Commission (Codex).^{1&2}. To benefit from the Codex recommendations and participate effectively in the Codex work, countries are advised to establish well-functioning national Codex coordinating offices which coordinate participation in codex meetings and development of national food standards.

Most IGAD member countries do not have consolidated national food safety policies or laws that are necessary for formulation of efficient and effective food safety control systems

According to a FAO/IGAD joint food safety assessment exercise carried out recently in the IGAD region, most member countries do not have consolidated food safety policies or laws that are necessary for formulation of efficient and effective food safety control systems (FAO/IGAD, 2021)³. Kenya is the only country in the Eastern Africa that has a national food safety policy. Additionally, only Kenya had established a multi-sectoral National Food Safety Coordination Committee (NFSCC).

The assessment found further that, although all IGAD member countries (except Somalia) have established institutions for standard setting and do participate in Codex activities, they lack the necessary capacities to effectively contribute to setting of international standards or enough resources to develop national technical standards. The level of participation and engagement in Codex work varies from country to country, with Kenya and Uganda the most actively participating countries and with established multi-sectoral Codex coordinating committees which operate under the national standard bodies.

¹ Codex Alimentarius Commission, Joint FAO/WHO Food Standards Programme, FAO, 00153 Rome, Italy, and from the website at: www.codexalimentarius.org

² The Codex Alimentarius Commission is an intergovernmental body that coordinates development of food standards & recommendations at the international level, with the main objectives to protect the health of consumers and ensure fair practices in food trade.

³ FAOSFE/IGAD (2021). Assessment of the policy, regulatory, and institutional environment for food safety in the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD) region. A Report. Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

2. REGIONAL (IGAD) LEVEL CHALLENGES: RUDIMENTARY OR MISSING FOOD SAFETY PLATFORMS, FRAMEWORKS, AND STRATEGIES

While presence of the IGAD Secretariat as a regional body is an opportunity to provide a regional platform and frameworks to improve food safety and standards, the Secretariat lacks a regional food safety strategy and clear framework to govern development and harmonization of regional food safety related policies, laws, and institutions.

As a result, there are no harmonized food safety policies and standards necessary to enhance food trade and, thereby, food and nutrition security in the region. However, it should be noted, as a positive development, that IGAD has developed a five-year Regional Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Strategy and Plan of Action 2016/17-2021/22¹.

This is a strong foundation for formulation of regional food safety strategies or food safety measures. The regional SPS strategy is based on IGAD's focus on environmental protection, economic cooperation and integration in an effort to achieve regional food security and sustainable development of natural resources and environmental protection.

IGAD lacks regional food safety framework to govern development and harmonization of food safety related policies, laws, and institutions in the region.

¹ <https://icpald.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IGAD-Regional-SPS-Strategy-and-Plan-of-Action-2017-2022.pdf>



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3. STAKEHOLDER RELATED CHALLENGES: UNDERDEVELOPED PRIVATE SECTOR AND CONSUMER-BASED MECHANISMS

There are no strong private sector and consumer-based mechanisms that could spearhead implementation and monitoring of food safety measures and standards.

Presumably, there is very low awareness on the impact of non-compliance to food safety standards among actors along the food chain. Furthermore, there are no strong consumer-based platforms through which consumers can raise their voices about food safety problems.

Low awareness on the impact of non-compliance to food safety standards among the private sector and lack of consumer-based mechanisms for consumers to voice their concerns about food safety problems

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Create an enabling policy, regulatory, and institutional environment for food safety control: All the IGAD Member States are advised to prioritize creation of an enabling environment for food safety control through development and implementation of comprehensive food safety policies, laws and institutional frameworks that provide for food safety and Codex coordination mechanisms acceptable to all the actors in the food chain.
- IGAD Member States and development partners are also advised to prioritize awareness raising among policy makers on the importance of food safety and Codex standards. This will provide assurance that governments and development partners prioritize food safety matters and allocate adequate resources for food safety control and participation in Codex work.
- Harmonize regional food safety control practices and procedures: It is recommended for the IGAD Secretariat to establish a mechanism for development and harmonisation of food policies, standards and regulations as well as a forum for developing regional positions on matters to be discussed in international Codex meetings.
- Enhance private sector participation: It is recommended that private sector associations form self-regulatory mechanisms through which they can monitor compliance with food safety standards or regulations.
- Enhance consumer participation: Additionally, it is important to strengthen consumer participation in food safety related issues. This can be approached through consumer associations that can serve as platforms to communicate food safety risks and challenges to food regulators and dealers.
- Mobilize additional resources: IGAD Secretariat, Member States, and development partners are advised to mobilize additional resources for effective implementation of the above recommendations with a view to improve protection of people in the IGAD region against food borne illnesses and promote inter- and intra-regional food trade which would contribute to implementation of the recently commenced African Continental Free Trade Area Agreement (AfCFTA) and, thereby, to food and nutrition security.



Joint product of :
The Subregional Office for Eastern Africa (FAO/SFE) of the
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
and
The Intergovernmental Authority on Development
(IGAD)

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