The issue

The COVID-19 pandemic has a substantial impact on food supply chains and food control systems. Labour shortages, facility closures, physical distancing requirements, travel and trade restrictions and other preventative measures, are affecting the performance of agri-food supply chains. Reduced production capacity and reduced trade are leading to immediate and longer-term risks for food production, distribution and availability. At the same time, the significant scale of the economic recession is raising concerns about aggravating hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition with a particularly worrying impact on the most vulnerable groups. The safety of foods relies on effectiveness of functioning national food control systems. The national food control systems are under considerable strain caused by uncertainty, reduced resources, knowledge gaps and the need to set and implement additional/temporary regulatory actions. In addition, regulatory agencies suffer from resource constraints as laboratory capacity is diverted to COVID-19 analyses and its workforce decimated by workers illness, redeployment and restrictions in movement due to lock-down measures. With all the strain on food systems and regulatory authorities, the integrity of food and the reliability of food supply chains are threatened further by reduced food safety governance, transparency and trust in food safety by the public. All these new food safety challenges come on top of the already formidable efforts necessary to-date to assess and manage risks from chemical and microbiological contamination, combat antimicrobial resistance and prevent and control foodborne zoonotic diseases.

The action

1. **Strengthening participation by members in global and regional multi-stakeholder networks and platforms**, such as the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)/World Health Organization (WHO) Regional Coordinating Committees (RCC), the FAO/WHO International Food Safety Authorities Network (INFOSAN), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and others. Ensuring that these networks/platforms are firmly anchored within regional trading blocs and prioritized food safety issues to be addressed; promoting engagement in the development of international food safety and quality standards and codes of good practices (Codex Alimentarius standards and others) at national and international levels; promoting trade policy coordination and fostering private sector engagement.

2. **Supporting national authorities to comply with trade relevant food safety guidance and standards.** This will include:
   - Establishing integrated food control systems along the entire food chain with an emphasis on supporting mechanisms for regulatory coherence and stakeholder

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**Budget**
USD 2 million
**Time frame**
2021–2024
**SDGs**

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**Related FAO policy notes on COVID-19**

- **Food Safety in the time of COVID-19**
- **COVID-19 and Food Safety: Guidance for competent authorities responsible for national food safety control systems**
- **COVID-19 and Food Safety: Guidance for food businesses: Interim guidance**
Trade and food safety standards

engagement in regulatory and policy decisions and their application; streamlining of procedures for achieving sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) compliance; promoting risk-based programming and decision-making; supporting participation in setting of international science-based standards, in particular Codex food safety standards.

- Establishing emergency early warning and response preparedness systems for events with the potential to disrupt food supply chains.
- Promoting the adoption, implementation and use of internationally recognised foods safety and quality standards and practices (Codex standards and others) and trade agreements (World Trade Organization Agreements on the application of sanitary and phytosanitary measures, Technical barriers to trade and trade facilitation).
- Designing programmes for coordinated and sustainable use of laboratory and other key food safety infrastructure and services optimised to support food safety and quality policies, including surveillance and monitoring activities.

Developing training materials and training guidance in collaboration with national, regional and international institutions targeted at empowering those best placed in a country to help smallholders and those involved in the formal and informal economy. The emphasis of this action will be to help smallholders comply with food safety and quality standards, access larger markets and ultimately strengthen the local and regional food supply and its resilience.

Expected results

The programme aims to address both the immediate challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the structural constraints that are affecting food safety and food trade at national, regional and global levels, thus preparing to face eventual emergencies and crises for safeguarding continuity of food supply and ensuring food security. The overall programme objective is to facilitate compliance with food safety standards not only to improve food safety locally, but also to increase regional, intra-regional and international safe food trade. The programme will aim to achieve the following results:

- Improved evidence-based decision-making and policy coordination at national and regional levels. This will be achieved through actions above. Development of capacities and implementation of food safety risk analysis principles including risk assessment, risk profiling, and risk prioritization to facilitate informed risk management with limited resources and effective risk communication. Finally, support to the regional multi-stakeholder networks would promote food safety policy coordination, potentially serving as a secretariat and discussion forum for other programme outputs (such as the trade assessments and regional early warning and market intelligence systems).

- Enhanced regulatory cooperation at the regional level to improve regulatory oversight in agricultural value chains, promote implementation and use of science-based standards (e.g., Codex Alimentarius standards), as well as promoting mutual recognition, equivalence and harmonization of food control systems. The establishment/strengthening of multi-stakeholder regional and international networks would advance regulatory cooperation and promote harmonization of approaches to food safety risk assessments, regulatory measures and certification; and foster cooperation with the private sector. Technical assistance and capacity development activities on food safety standards would strengthen institutional implementation capacities, leading to more resilient food safety systems in favour of international food trade.

Partnerships

Regional institutions, economic communities, such as following:

Africa: the African Union (AU), the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) and the East African Community (EAC)

Asia and the Pacific: the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Secretariat of the Pacific Community (SPC)

Europe and Central Asia: the European Union (EU), Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)

Latin America and the Caribbean: Instituto Interamericano de Cooperación para la Agricultura Integración Centroamericana, Organismo Internacional Regional de Sanidad Agropecuaria

Near East and North Africa: the Gulf Cooperation Council

Trade and Food Safety Standards National institutions and organizations: ministries of agriculture, trade, economy, and health; food safety and customs authorities; chambers of commerce; private-sector associations; non-governmental and civil-society organizations; research institutes and academia.

International financial institutions: the African Development Bank (AfDB), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Islamic Development Bank (IsDB), the World Bank Group and private foundations

International organizations and programmes: the Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF), the International Atomic
The programme will focus on technical support to streamline administrative procedures and implement harmonized food safety standards, including the promotion of digital innovations along specific borders, for example, among South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation countries. Another focus will be on strengthening regional multi-stakeholder trade platforms, promoting paperless trade and e-commerce and anchoring these in existing trading blocs, such as ASEAN, to develop regional initiatives, enhance policy coordination and provide capacity development for digital innovation and trade facilitation. The regional focus countries for this programme are Bangladesh, Bhutan, Cambodia, Lao People’s Democratic Republic, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Tonga, Vanuatu and Viet Nam.

Eastern Europe and Central Asia
As the European Union, Eurasian Economic Union, China and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries are major agri-food markets, the programme will focus on ensuring food safety in domestic markets and export promotion, through technical support to smallholders and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) on compliance with food safety standards and digital solutions (online digital platforms to promote safe food trade in internal and external markets). It will also support multi-sectoral dialogue to promote evidence-based food and trade-policy decision-making.

Latin America and the Caribbean
Because of the vast differences between the subregions (net exporters in the Southern cone of South America, net importers in the Caribbean), the programme will be tailored to subregional needs. The focus will be on policy and regulatory coordination and entail developing public-sector capacity at national and subregional level and providing technical support to subregional institutions to comply with sanitary and phytosanitary standards and related procedures.

Near East and North Africa
Because of the high dependence of countries in the region on food imports, the programme will prioritize technical assistance in the area of strengthening national food safety capabilities in the following countries: Algeria, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia and the Gulf Cooperation Council countries.

Regional and country focus

The regional contexts described here are subject to change in line with the results of ongoing country assessments and dialogues with Governments and partner organizations. The countries listed may therefore change. The programme will be tailored to the specific needs and characteristics of each region.

Africa
With the time and costs involved in obtaining agricultural trade certificates in sub-Saharan Africa among the highest in the world, the programme will focus on strengthening food control systems, improving infrastructure and promoting the adoption of digital solutions.

Asia and the Pacific
The focus will be on supporting trade policies and trade facilitation measures to enable resilient food systems transformations for secure, safe and nutritious food for all.

Programme links

Globally: Strengthening global food safety through improved capacities for food control at regional and country level (GCP/GLO/939/USA); FAO/WHO Codex Trust Fund (and various projects funded therein) (GCP/GLO/893/MUL and UNJP/GLO/887/WHO); Strengthening national food control systems through a robust and harmonized assessment process (GCP/GLO/151/MUL).

Africa: FAO support to the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) trade facilitation programme (GCP/INT/387/COM).

Asia and the Pacific: Support for Capacity Building for International Food Safety Standard Development and Implementation in ASEAN Countries (GCP/RAS/295/JPN); Enhancing Capacity in Codex for Effective Participation and Contribution of Selected Countries in Asia (GCP/RAS/278/JPN).

Europe and Central Asia: Regional Initiative “Transforming food systems and facilitating market access and integration”.

Latin America and the Caribbean: STDF/PPG/716 “Food Safety Risk Analysis Capacity building program in Latin America”.

Near East, North Africa: Follow-up to the FAO/UNIDO project “Arab Food Safety Initiative for Trade Facilitation” (UNJP/RNE/010/UID).

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