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ASSURING FOOD SAFETY AND QUALITY IN SME FOOD ENTERPRISES

(Prepared by Zimbabwe)

Economic importance of the sector

The Small, Medium and Micro Enterprises (SMMEs) sector plays a significant role in the Zimbabwe economy. It accounts for close to 15%-20% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and employs a huge portion of the country's population. It has been realized that the Government's broad social and economic goals such as poverty reduction and the economic empowerment of marginalized communities can be realized through pursuance of programmes and policies that enhance the growth of this sector hence the current efforts by the Government of Zimbabwe, through the Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises Development to achieve this goal.

Globally, SMMEs have been identified as the engines for economic growth. In addition to filling gaps left by big factories in times of economic recessions, SMMEs are more adaptable to changes in the macro-economic environments in which they operate thus the majority tend to survive through turbulent and harsh conditions. The majority of SMMEs in Zimbabwe make use of labour-intensive production process which makes them a source of income for the large proportion of the country's labour force which cannot be readily absorbed by the large-scale sector.

The scaling down of operations by big firms in Zimbabwe to concentrate on their core businesses has seen an increase in the number of new SMMEs that either take up the niches left by the big firms or are sub-contracted to do the jobs. Such a phenomenon in Zimbabwe has also seen the emergence of many SMME food processors with own brands or under franchise arrangements. The majority of these make use of traditional methods in their production process and these include those that are into jam and peanut butter making, fruit and vegetable drying, production of milk products, meat processing, food canning and fast foods operations.

SMMEs are the backbone of the private sector, not only in developed, but in developing countries. They provide services and components that otherwise could not be produced or provided efficiently by large firms, to these firms' production processes.

The recently ended land redistribution exercise in the country has seen the emergence of a greater number of farmers and consequently larger area of land being utilized for agricultural purposes. The Government of Zimbabwe has embarked on deliberate policy effort to encourage value addition to agricultural produce through agro-processing in order for the country to realize better returns 'from its products on the world market. Thus the role of the SMMEs in the agro-processing business cannot be overemphasized.

Application of appropriate quality assurance schemes

SMME food enterprises face challenges which include a lack of capital, technological resources, skilled personnel and appropriate quality control systems as laid down by various food regulations. On the other hand, because of the very fact that their food enterprises are small, they easily adapt to market needs and are able to capture market niches.

Consumers attach great importance to the quality of foodstuffs they consume hence SMMEs need to take corrective measures to sway consumers' perceptions in their favour as modern day competition tends to be on the quality, rather than on the pricing front. In addition to enhancing market competitiveness, the adoption and implementation of internationally recognized food safety and quality standards serves as a powerful tool against unjustified Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) measures on the international market.

Given the foregoing it is imperative that both the consumer and the SMME enterprise are sensitized to the need to adhere to appropriate quality standards. The Standards Association of Zimbabwe (SAZ) is a key player in the development and implementation of standards in the country.

A great deal of effort has been directed towards this goal; however more needs to be done, especially to the micro-enterprise sector, e.g. the simplification of the language of existing standards for the benefit of most of the micro entrepreneurs. Another mitigating factor against the adoption of standards by SMMEs is the fact that they are voluntary. Efforts to educate SMME owners on the benefits of implementing national (SAZ) and international (Codex) standards, however still continue.

The food, beverages and bottled water SMMEs can make use of the Hazard Analysis and Critical Point (HACCP) system - a proactive food safety management system that involves controlling critical points in food handling to reduce the risk of deviations that might affect food safety. The system is ideal in that it can be used to ensure food safety at all levels of the food chain and builds upon prerequisite programmes such as Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), Good Hygienic Practices (GHP) and Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP) as part of an overall food safety and quality management system. In addition to many other advantages, implementation of the HACCP concept enables enterprises to shift from the resource-intensive formal product inspection and testing scenario that most companies strictly adhere to, to preventative control of hazards at all stages of food production. This is because HACCP principles relate to the entire production and distribution chain.

SAZ also has standards for a wide array of food products and SMMEs can readily make use of them. Codex and regional standards can also be implemented; however, lack of quality control departments and testing laboratories is a common problem in most SMME food manufacturers. The Government Analyst Laboratories are available to assist these SMMEs with their testing requirements but due to reasons best known to themselves, not many of them utilize this facility.

The major problem with regard to the use of appropriate quality assurance schemes is found in the micro-enterprise owners, who normally produce to service their local communities. In these enterprises, quality control tends to be through physical inspection of raw materials and end product only. There is normally no use of proper packaging and a wide array of containers is used for this purpose. These include newspapers, glass bottles, plastic jars, metal tins and buckets; among others and at times customers provide their own packaging. Use of bare hands during packaging and measurement increase chances of getting the food contaminated through handling. The produce is normally sold from the home and from tuck shops.

A campaign to raise consumer awareness of food safety as well as training for the micro-enterprise owner would go a long way in improving the safety and quality of food they distribute.

Controlling the safety and quality of SME foods

Food safety and quality issues are currently governed in Zimbabwe by various pieces of legislation including, the Food and Food Standards Act, Public Health Act, Animal Health Act, the Dairy Act, Fruit Marketing Act. However, the proposed formation of the Food Safety Control Authority which will bring together inspectors in provinces and at ports of entry as well as the food and water laboratory efforts will go a long way in enhancing the enforcement of these pieces of legislation and coordination of the various bodies that are in the sector. In addition, training SMMEs in the food processing industry in safety and quality issues would also assist in reducing the risk of food-borne diseases. Improved education on foods safety issues will also help the processors to be more sensitive to safety and quality issues of their produce.

There is also need for assistance to be rendered to SMMEs to acquire appropriate or state-of-the-art food processing equipment for them to avoid makeshift equipment, which may contaminate the foodstuffs they produce. This assistance can be in form of a low interest loan.