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SITUATION ANALYSIS OF FOOD SAFETY SYSTEMS IN MALAWI

(Prepared by Malawi)

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Introduction

Adequate, safe and quality food is a vital element for the achievement of good health and acceptable level of health. The food safety and quality control systems in Malawi is aimed at protecting the consumer against unsafe, impure and fraudulently presented food that may be injurious to the health of the consumer and also ensure fair food trade. This is achieved through the enforcement of food laws, regulations and standards and also the implementation of programmes and projects aimed risk reduction throughout the food chain. The responsibility for food safety and quality control in the country is shared among different ministries and agencies and there are wide variations in the expertise and resources available between the key stakeholders.

Background information

Malawi is one of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. It is bordered by Mozambique to the east, south and southwest, Zambia to the west, and Tanzania to the North. It is estimated that Malawi has a population of about 13 million with an area of about 118, 000 square kilometers, a quarter of which is covered by Lake Malawi. 80% of the population resides in rural areas, and the remaining 20% is urban based.

Agriculture is the mainstay of the economy in Malawi. The sector contributes about 36% of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), 87% of the total employment, supplies more than 65% of the manufacturing sector's raw materials, provides 64% of the total income of the rural people, and contributes more than 90% of the foreign exchange earnings. It is the main livelihood of the majority of rural people, who account for more than 85% of the currently. The country's GDP per capita is US \$ 182. At least 65% of the population lives below poverty line, earning less than US\$ 1 per day. The literacy rate is 79% for males and 46% for females.

Malawi has a high under-five and maternal mortality rates estimated at 189 per 1, 000 live births and 1,120 per 100, 000 live births respectively (Malawi Demographic Health Survey 2000)¹. One of the major causes of deaths among under-fives is the high burden of diseases such as malaria, pneumonia, diarrhea, anemia and malnutrition. The situation is exacerbated by the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

¹ www.nso.malawi.net

Over the years, the country has experienced various degrees of cholera and dysentery outbreaks some of which were associated with poor food and personal hygiene practices.

Legal and Policy Framework

Malawi has various laws and regulations that have been enacted over the years to regulate and enhance food safety to preserve the health of the public and facilitate international trade requirements. However, there is no unified policy and a single food law in Malawi that regulate issues of food safety. Various ministries and sectors involved in food safety and quality control have their own pieces of legislation that govern their operations according to their area of focus. The following are the major institutions in the country that are responsible for ensuring food safety and quality control:

- Ministry of Agriculture
- Ministry of Health
- Malawi Bureau of Standards (MBS)
- Ministry of Commerce and Private Sector Development
- Pharmacy, Drugs and Poisons Board
- Local Government Assemblies (City, Municipal, Town and District Assemblies)
- Consumer Association of Malawi (CAMA)
- Ministry of Natural Resources and Environmental Affairs

There are several laws and pieces of legislation in the country that govern issues of food safety and the major ones are following:

- Local Government Act (1998)
- The Standards Act (Malawi Bureau of Standards) 1972
- Public Health Act (1948)
- Meat and meat products Act No.183 (1976)
- Consumer Protection Act (2003)
- Competition and Fair Trading Act (1998)
- Milk and Milk Products Acts No. 43 (1971)
- Food By-laws (2002)
- Sanitary arrangements By-laws
- Peddlers By-laws (2002).
- Liquor Licensing Act
- Pesticides Act (2000)
- Biosafety Act No. 13 (2002)
- Control and Diseases of Animals Act No. 143 (1976)
- Fertilizers, Farm Feeds and Remedies Act No.43 (1989)
- Plant Protection Act No. 11 (1969)

A lot of problems are being faced in trying to enforce the above pieces of legislation because of their fragmentation and lack of coordination mechanisms between food authority agencies. There is inadequate capacity to enforce the available Acts and Regulations. In addition, some legislations are outdated and cannot be used to address contemporary and emerging issues in food safety and quality control. Inadequate capacity to enforce the Acts and Regulations.

Food Standards and Technical Regulations

The Malawi Bureau of Standards has the mandate to develop Malawi Standards, which includes food standards. The food standards developed contain provisions of food safety. The food standards are based on the joint FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission. The standards cover food safety issues such as microbiological quality, food additive requirements, levels of contaminants such as heavy metal and hygiene and sanitation standards. Other sectoral ministries and departments have also the responsibility and the mandate to develop technical guidelines to guide their operations and to ensure that food safety and quality requirements are satisfied. Ministries of Agriculture, Health, Tourism and Commerce and Private Sector Development are some of the institutions that are responsible for developing and enforcing food standards and regulations.

Laboratory Capacity for Food Safety Assurance

There is some capacity to analyze biological, chemical, heavy metals and physical food hazards at national level. There are four laboratories that are capable of analyzing food hazards (contaminants), namely Malawi Bureau of Standards laboratory, Community Health Sciences Laboratory of Ministry of Health, Central Veterinary Laboratory and Agricultural Research Laboratories of Ministry of Agriculture. Apart from the Malawi Bureau of Standards, the rest of the laboratories do not conduct analysis of food for hazards regularly largely due to lack of comprehensive national food safety programme, and inadequate skilled manpower, testing equipment and facilities. There is also generally lack of modern laboratory equipment. The Malawi bureau of Standard, Community Health Sciences and Central Veterinary laboratories are also used as reference laboratories.

Food-borne Disease Surveillance

There is no surveillance system that is put in place to monitor the incidence of food-borne diseases per se in Malawi. The Ministry of Health through the Epidemiology Unit introduced an Integrated Disease Surveillance System (IDSR) to monitor incidence of 16 selected disease conditions. Two of the sixteen diseases are cholera and dysentery (Bloody Diarrhoea), which are to some extent related to food and water contamination. The magnitude of cholera over the past years varied greatly, from 33,223 cases in 2001/2002 cholera seasons to 1241 cases in 2004/2005 season. However, other biological food-borne diseases such E. coli and Salmonellosis are not monitored routinely due to lack of a comprehensive food safety and control programme. As a result, the burden of food-borne illnesses and new and emerging food-borne diseases are left undocumented.

Human Resources

There are wide variations in the expertise for food safety activities carried out by different agencies in Malawi. The available numbers of staff and their areas of specialization are not adequate to perform the required tasks of a fully-fledged national food quality control system. There is critical shortage of food inspectors, food analysts /technicians, specialists.

What is being done

Food premises inspections to ensure maintenance of hygiene and food standards is an on-going process carried out by Ministry of Health, Malawi Bureau of standards and other stakeholders such as the Consumer Association of Malawi.

Food sampling and testing to ensure that food sold or exported to other countries meet the local and international standards. The Malawi Bureau of Standards and Ministry of Agriculture mainly play this role routinely, and to some extent, the Ministry of Health. A laboratory at Chitedze Agricultural Research Station carries out aflatoxin tests on food crops such as maize and groundnuts as a way of monitoring aflatoxin levels in imported and exported food crops.

Enforcement of regulations to ensure that food exposed for human consumption satisfy the minimum requirements for hygienic standards, chemical and bacteriological requirements. Routine inspections of foods such as meat, milk and milk products and food inspectors do monitoring of salt iodine through the use of Rapid Test Kits.

The Pesticides Control Board (PCB), which was established under an act of parliament in 2000, monitors and regulates the use of pesticides in the production of various food crops such as vegetables, fruits tea and maize. However, there is no mechanism to monitor the effects of the pesticides on human health as well as their effects on the environment.

Challenges

Although the above-mentioned activities are done in Malawi, the following challenges abound:

- Lack of comprehensive Food Act that harmonises food safety and health issues performed by different sectors.
- Weak enforcement of available Sectoral Food laws, and Local Assembly (Authority) Food By-laws
- Inadequate laboratory capacity and equipment for analysis of food samples
- Inadequate capacity of city and district assemblies to provide sanitary facilities, water supply and adequate and proper premises for food vendors.
- Conflict of the responsibility for protecting public health with obligations to facilitate trade or receive food donations or develop a sector.
- Rapidly changing technologies in food production, processing and marketing which do not much with the current capacity of the country to keep pace.
- Inadequate collaboration and coordination between different stakeholders involved in food safety and quality control. Most agencies involved in food safety issues work in parallel and there is no clear strategic plan for implementing food safety programs.
- Proliferation Street Food Vending, which is not regulated at the moment. Street Food Vending has become one of the major sources of income generation for the urban and peri-urban settlers in Malawi. Increased numbers of unemployed youth migration from rural areas, decline in prices of some cash crops such as tobacco and the increased numbers of widows and orphans due to HIV/AIDS have contributed significantly to the number of street food vendors.
- Inadequate awareness among the general public on the dangers of food hazards and unsafe foods to human health. Because stakeholders involved in food safety programmes work in a disintegrated, the public does not get standardized messages and information.
- Malawi has no capacity at the moment to develop, test and regulate the imports as well as utilization of genetically modified foods (GM foods). This is a big challenge in light of the persistent food shortages in the country whereby food has to be imported or donated to the country some of which could be genetically modified food.
- Limited human capacity to implement Food Safety programmes. The country does not have adequate staff to carry out food inspections, sampling and analysis. The problem is more acute in the rural areas where the majority of the people live. Most Malawians process food at household level and the safety of such locally processed foods cannot be guaranteed all the time.
- Inadequate financial resources.

- Provision of adequate portable water, sanitation amenities, food preparation places and food storage facilities to street food vendors is one of the big challenges to ensure food safety for street vended foods.

Way Forward

1. Formulate a comprehensive Food Act that will regularise the one government Ministry (Ministry of Health) to be the focal point for food safety and also encompass emerging issues in food safety and control.
2. Regularize street food vending through an Act of parliament since street food vending is recognized as an important sector in Malawi.
3. Develop comprehensive guidelines for monitoring food safety and quality control.
4. Develop plan of action for consumer education and capacity building for street food vendors.
5. Promote effective collaboration and coordination between all sectors/agencies involved in the management and control of food safety and quality through establishment of national food safety assurance steering committee to oversee the activities of foods safety. Under it a technical committee made up of members from the government ministries, regulatory bodies and other agencies involved in food safety and quality control need to be formed to perform technical tasks and report to the national steering committee.
6. Train some staff in specialized areas of food safety and quality control.

For the above recommendations to materialise, there is need to make resources available (government, MOH partners (WHO/FAO), donor agencies).

Technical Assistance will be needed in the following areas:

- Assistance in the preparation of unified food law and regulations
- Developing national food safety and quality control policy and strategies
- Establishing/improving food analysis capabilities through capacity building.