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REGULATORY ISSUES: FOOD SAFETY SITUATION IN MONGOLIA

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1. INTRODUCTION

Food safety is an emerging issue in Mongolia as its international food trade expands and the numbers of food premises are increasing. This article aims to introduce about the changes in food safety of Mongolia in comparison of before and after 1990, when the country has made a dramatic socioeconomical change from centralized economy to free market economy. From the end users health outcome or the end of the food chain till food supply, storage and point of purchase you will see the food safety situation of Mongolia. Some facts are given in Tables and in below as collected by the local inspection agencies within their current capacity of analysis and monitoring. Some positive changes also are mentioned such as changes in legislative environment and technological improvement in small food enterprises during the last years. Giving these situation objectives of the National Plan of Action on Food security, safety and nutrition in Mongolia will be stated.

2. FOOD SAFETY ISSUES

The country health reports of Mongolia show that gastrointestinal infections, diarrhoeal diseases and toxico-infections contribute up to 30 percent of the total infectious diseases. In Mongolia, typhoid and paratyphoid fever, shigellosis, Hepatitis A, brucellosis, are increasingly registered during the last years. Diarrhoeal diseases and bacterial food-borne infections are not often reported accurately whereas only extensive outbreaks of food-borne infectious diseases are reported and diagnosed. Hepatitis A is a significant public health issue. The prevalence of Hepatitis A was 18.6 and 35.7 (per 10 000 population) in 1999 and 2000 with the increase of 1.9 times in 2000.

As former “socialist” country Mongolia started political and economical transition in early 1990s and opened its market to introduce free market economy. Due to economic hardship and discontinuation of the financial assistance from the former Soviet Union and other socialist countries the country became unable to run its domestic industry including domestic food production, its procurement, transport and distribution system. This situation led to decrease of food produced domestically excluding foods from traditional animal husbandry such as meat. For instance, Mongolia was a food exporting country and domestic needs were well met by the national production until 1991. Total sector production had decreased 3 times in 1995 and 1.5 times in 2000 compared to production in 1991 and 1995 respectively. At present 70% percent of flour needed are imported which have increased by 33% compared to 1990 and by 43.3% compared to 1995. Although number of domestic animals increased and subsequent growth of the meat production, availability of milk and diary product in 2000 has worsened compared to 1995 and 1990. On the other hand, as a member of WTO since 1997 tax on imported goods decreased up to zero. All these factors are contributed to the increase of imported foods, number of small and medium size food production enterprises and food outlets.

Mongolia is presently trading with more than 60 countries with imports and exports. Although most traders import foods in bulk but number of traders do food importation in small amounts making difficult or even impossible to inspect. Moreover, since 1990 food sale and storage in ship container are now becoming an unacceptably wrong practice of traders due to their sole purpose of earning and surviving. The container is not normally intended for food sale and it makes foods vulnerable to physical factors such as heat and cold. State Inspectorate has revealed that more than fifty percent of foods sold in the containers did not have permission from the appropriate inspection authorities. Moreover, 9.7% of foods were out of the expiration date, 28.7% were failing to meet frozen condition (in March), and 14.6% were improperly packaged.

Domestic production is now trying to revive and technological improvement are made especially packaging and labeling technology. However, domestic food industries need to do much to introduce HACCP, GHP and GMP.

By 2000, the number of food premises was increased 1.7 times more than the level of 1996. Laboratory analysis of the State Inspection Agency in 2000 revealed that 35.5% of the total samples failed to comply with the allowable level. Between 1996-1999 the average microbiological contamination of food products was recorded as 22.7%, chemical contamination was 14.1% and heavy metal's contamination was 6%. In the last few years the volume of the foods destroyed because of their poor safety and its money value is increasing. Results of contaminants monitoring study (1999) undertaken by the State Inspection Agency of Hygiene and Epidemiologist showed that 8% of a total of 2116 samples, the content of aflatoxin B1 and B2 was higher than maximum allowable levels. (Table 1)

Table 1. Results of the food safety inspection

Year	Number of food premises	Number of inspection	Frequency of inspection	Value of destroyed food products (MNT)	Contamination (%)		
					Chemical	Microbial	Heavy metal
1996	9006	25726	3.3	137.2	9.7	35.8	1.06
1997	9908	25985	2.8	82.2	13.8	17.7	15.3
1998	15055	32972	2.3	119.9	18.1	15.5	5.1
1999	17878	32525	2.3	158.3	14.7	16.9	13.7
2000	15028	31197	2.1	135.9			

MNT: Mongolian currency, Tugrug, 1100 MNT= 1 USD by 2001.

Table 2 Bacterial contamination of food

Year	Meat, meat products	Flour products	Milk, dairy products	Fruit and vegetables	Processed and semi-processed food
1996	35.4	20.9	25.6	7.8	29.5
1997	26.05	14.5	29.4	18.3	30.5
1998	27	10	33.1	10.2	22.4
1999	25.5	10.6	22.7	7.7	19.4

3. LEGISLATIVE ENVIRONMENT

Between 1995-1999, the Government has developed several legislative acts and regulations related to nutrition and food safety such as approval of Food Law by the Parliament in 1999 and International Codex standards through the National Standardization Office. In 2000, the President of Mongolia issued a decree consisting from three parts concerning organization of consolidated structure of administrative management of the food safety and security, establishment of national Reference laboratory on food safety and networking, and introduction of HACCP and GMP in food industry. Within the framework of the decree the Government of Mongolia has developed and

approved a National Plan of Action (NPAN) on Food Security, Safety and Nutrition with the full support WHO in 2001.

However, significant articles of the Food Law disappeared during the Parliament discussion. The enforcement of laws and regulations are incomplete, and several areas of the food chain remain inadequately protected. Therefore, a review and updating of existing food safety laws and regulations in accordance with international requirements, development hygiene regulations based upon Codex Principles of Good Hygienic Practice.

On the other side, enforcement of the President's decree to restructure current organization of the agencies dealing with the Food safety is urging. There are about 6 Agencies under 5 Ministries are responsible for different aspects of the Food safety.

The NPAN has following objectives and strategies:

Objectives of NPAN on Food safety:

- To harmonize the national food safety measures with international standards and establish a system to build a capacity to conduct risk analysis and safety control measures
- To strengthen food safety control laboratories and improve national human resource capabilities
- To conduct training and advocacy on food safety issues for producers, consumers in order to improve proper culture in food consumption and public participation.
- To ensure the safety of water and sanitation
- To strengthen research, monitoring and information system

Each objective has defined strategies as given below:

Under the first objective:

- Develop intersectoral coordination and collaboration to strengthen food safety control, including definition of responsibilities between different food control agencies.
- Develop standard procedures for inspection and risk analysis, and build human resource capacity on risk analysis.
- Expand cooperation with other countries and international organizations on food safety.
- Establish a National CODEX Committee based upon the recommendations of CODEX.

Under the second objective:

- Review, update and enforce existing laws, decrees, regulations, requirements and procedures to improve food safety including for imported food and in tourism outlets while minimising their negative effects on trade.
- Develop and implement a laboratory strengthening program by developing a laboratory accreditation system and participating in the work of the international laboratory accreditation system

- Use modern system for providing hygiene and sanitary conditions in food chain/production, trade and services, such as GHP, HACCP, and GMP.
- Establish control systems to provide veterinary and phytosanitary conditions for raw commodities for processed foods.

Under the third objective

- Review, update and implement existing laws, regulations, guidelines, and standards to ensure sanitation and the quality of drinking water and potable water for food processing including through collaborating with other water program/projects.
- Estimate resources of water through exploration and survey of water sources in order to provide reliable quality and availability of water for population.
- Determine and create sanitation zones for water sources and certify them.
- Set-up equipment to soften and demineralise water in some soums and centrally located areas, in which the water quality has not met the standard requirements.
- Commence the establishment of network at big basins to control water level changes and contamination of ground water sources for big cities.

Under the fourth objective:

- Increase the capacity of human resources in Mongolia in the areas of food security, safety and nutrition, paying particular attention to policy-making and program-implementation areas within the Government and its agencies.
- Increase the food security, safety and nutrition capacity of national research institutes and educational institutes

4. CONCLUSION

Food safety is an emerging area in Mongolia needed strong international support towards implementation of NPAN mainly on advocacy, training of different stakeholders, establishment of training programs, and strengthening of laboratory capacity. Changing economic circumstances contributes significantly to the food safety situation. Vulnerability of traders and poor people to the different kinds of inspection penalties is very high and both destroyed foods and the labor of the traders are all national values. Therefore, inspection agencies must work towards prevention rather than control. Much to be done for national consensus building to consolidate different food safety agencies using more radical approaches by both Government and International agencies.