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SUMMARY

Agriculture forms the base of the Zimbabwean economy, contributing 45% of export earnings and providing livelihood to over 70% of the population. Food Safety is a problem of public health concern and is indicated by recurrent outbreaks of food related diseases. Food Control is the responsibility of various government ministries and local authorities. Food Control administration is weak due to fragmentation, inadequate resources and limited skills for food inspection.

This paper highlights the major food safety challenges faced by Zimbabwe and the contributions through technical co-operation towards the establishment of a comprehensive food control system in Zimbabwe. The technical co-operation project funded by the Food and Agriculture Organisation laid the foundation for the establishment of a National Food Control Authority, established policies and procedures for food import inspection and improved quality systems at the Government Analyst Laboratory which is the National Food Control Laboratory.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the globalization of food trade, development of new food production and processing technologies and emergence of new food related diseases ; food safety has become a public health problem of concern worldwide.

The approach to the management of food related risks has evolved over the years from end product inspection to a systematic approach of identifying, characterising, measuring risks of exposure to hazards and putting in place appropriate control measures to assure the safety of the consumer. Many countries including Zimbabwe are still battling with transformation of existing regulatory control systems to meet the challenges of the new era.

I wish to extend sincere appreciation to the organizers of this forum and to the Food and Agriculture Organization for affording me the opportunity to share experiences and to grow.

2. FOOD SAFETY CHALLENGES FOR ZIMBABWE

The Zimbabwean economy is Agriculture based, providing livelihood to over 70% of the population. The food industry is well developed producing a wide range of foods. The introduction of the Economic Structural Adjustment program in 1990 saw the closure of many companies forcing a majority of people to resort to informal business. This led to the mushrooming of a large informal food business sector, characterized by a low capital outlay, high level of mobility and poor knowledge of, or regard to food safety issues. The existing food control system was not designed to service such informal business and therefore could not cope with the demands for infrastructure support, training and health education. The regulatory framework did not tolerate such business as a result running battles between street food vendors and municipal police were a common sight.

The emergence of new technologies for food production and processing such as food irradiation and use of genetically modified organisms for food, raised concerns from consumers regarding the safety and acceptability of these technologies. Consumers demanded to know if control measures were in place, whether or not there was adequate capacity to verify presence or absence of these factors and the reliability of the test results. On the international scene, there is increased pressure for Governments to put in place adequate measures to assure the protection of human, plant and animal health; to be transparent and to base these measures on scientific fact. Zimbabwe is national legislation was out dated in some areas and inadequate to meet the new challenges.

Food related disease outbreaks are recurrent, in particular, cholerae, anthrax, foot and mouth constitute a serious public health concern and have resulted in periodic suspension of agricultural exports such as fish, beef and horticultural products. Agricultural exports constitute 45% of Zimbabwe's export earnings, the major food exports being beef, maize, sugar, tea, coffee and horticulture. On the other hand sub-standard imported foods were a common sight on the Zimbabwean market due to inadequate controls at ports of entries.

Assuring food safety is a complex matter requiring monitoring and control at all stages of production from the farm to the table. In Zimbabwe the responsibility for food control lies with several government departments among various government ministries as well as with local authorities. Many legal instruments deal with food safety issues and this leads to overlaps in some areas and gaps in others. An importer wishing to import dried beans would need to approach at least three different government departments to get clearance. There is no systematic way of collecting and processing data on foodborne diseases, foodlosses due to spoilage and rejections in order to target the limited resources on the key national problems. Lack of coherence and co-ordination among the key players has always been a cause for concern. The Government analyst laboratory serves as secretariat to the FSAB and also as the focal point for Codex and for co-ordination and development of food control activities in the country. Faced with the new challenges the laboratory did not have adequate capacity to carry out its

functions. The FSAB was not playing as dynamic a role as it ought to due largely to financial constraints and inadequate secretariat support. It was against this background that a technical co-operation project was initiated in June 1999 funded by the Food and Agriculture Organisation.

3. FUTURE PROSPECTS FOR FOOD CONTROL IN ZIMBABWE

The TCP project's overall objective was to improve the food control system and services in Zimbabwe by upgrading the analytical capabilities and information handling capacity of the Government analyst laboratory, strengthening the FSAB secretariat and optimising food inspection operations of Port Health.

It had three distinct components namely,

- strengthening the food control secretariat;
- strengthening food import inspection;
- improving quality assurance and information system for the Government analyst laboratory.

In each case there was an initial analysis of the problem by a consultant in order to recommend suitable ways of improving the situation.

2.1 STRENGTHENING THE FOOD CONTROL SECRETARIAT

With the help of an international consultant, consultations were held with key stakeholders from the ministries of Agriculture, Health and child welfare, Industry and commerce, local authorities, Consumer Council of Zimbabwe, academia and food industry.

A proposal for the reorganisation of food control in Zimbabwe was prepared. At a stakeholders workshop held in August 2000 in Harare, it was recommended that an autonomous independent body should be established to take responsibility for food safety and control work for Zimbabwe. It will also recommended that existing legislation should be reviewed to provide for the establishment of such a body and to ensure that food quality is monitored throughout the food chain.

Thirteen existing legislation were reviewed by a consultant under the TCP project. The Food and Food Standards Act was used as the basis for the draft Food Control Bill. The draft bill was finalised at another stakeholders workshop held in August 2001 in Kariba. The proposed Bill establishes the Food Control Authority as a body corporate run by a board appointed by the minister of Health and Child Welfare. The authority will have a full secretariat staff complement and will work with the existing enforcement agents. The Authority shall be responsible for defining national policy on food safety, determining food control program priorities, providing support to the implementing agencies, setting standards and ensuring uniform application of food standards and regulations throughout the country. It was also serve as Zimbabwe's link to the international community on issues relating to food control and standards.

The setting up of this Authority will provide the necessary separation of function between those responsible for food production and those responsible for assuring that the public is protected from consumption of unsafe food. The proposed Authority's budget will specifically be used for food control work and thus better effectiveness is anticipated. The Government Analyst Laboratory is the contact place for all work concerning the establishment of the authority.

2.2 IMPROVEMENT OF IMPORTED FOOD INSPECTION SYSTEM

The main problems identified during the initial assessment were:

- the organisational structure of Port Health was bureaucratic and hampered effective functioning of port health;
- Port Health did not have a separate budget and was not being given priority;
- resources such as infrastructure, manpower and equipment were inadequate to effectively man the ports;
- Port health officers were inadequately skilled to perform their functions;
- there were no documented policies and procedures for imported food inspection as result some food passed through ports without being inspected and procedures differed from one port to another much to the confusion of the importer.

Subsequently a training course for port health officers was organised with the help of a TCDC consultant. The consultant developed a Port health food inspection manual for Zimbabwe which formed the basis for establishment of policies and procedures for imported food inspection. The final evaluation of selected ports of entries indicated positive efforts toward implementation of the developed protocols.

2.3 IMPROVING QUALITY ASSURANCE OF THE GOVERNMENT ANALYST LABORATORY

The Government Analyst has among other duties the responsibility of testing food for regulatory purposes. As such it plays a key role in food quality monitoring and food import/export certification for Zimbabwe. The laboratory realised the need for putting in place a quality system that has international recognition and settled for ISO/IEC 17025 standard on “General requirements for competence of testing and calibration laboratories.” Added benefits of implementing such a system are transparency, efficiency and continuous improvement of quality.

A national consultant on quality systems was hired to provide training an ISO/IEC 17025 and technical support throughout the project phase. The Government Analyst selected a project team comprising 12 senior members from all sections of the laboratory. The team prepared a development and implementation plan for the 18 month period. The national consultant held a four-day training for the project team followed by a one-day awareness seminar for all staff members. The project team developed a quality policy statement, and a quality policy manual. The policy manual outlines Government Analyst policy regarding work at the laboratory in compliance with the ISO standard. All professional members of staff were trained in order to understand the standard and to implement the policy. All professional staff participated in documenting procedures and methods for the quality system. Thus a three tier documented system was put in place with participated from virtually all professional staff members each one focussing on their area of expertise. The participatory approach ensured commitment and acceptance of the system even before implementation. The consultant also trained the project team in various techniques necessary for successful implementation of the system in particular statistical techniques, quality costs and method validation. At the end of the project the quality system was fully documented and implementation had started.

In the 2002 annual plans the Government analyst intends to conduct internal audit training for staff and to seek accreditation for the most frequent tests. The shortage of foreign currency is a likely impediment since there is no local accreditation body. Realising the importance of accreditation the Government of Zimbabwe at the request of the Food Standards advisory body initiated the process of setting up a national accreditation body through the ministry of Industry and international trade. Priority for this work is being given to testing and calibration laboratories and to inspection services.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Resources for food control work are limited and inevitably there is always competition with other programs such as HIV aids, poverty alleviation to mention but a few. The strategy Zimbabwe is adopting is to pool those limited resources so as to focus them on to issues of national importance. The establishment of the National food control authority should facilitate this process and ensure integration of all food control measures along the food chain.