Food systems transformation
Antimicrobial resistance and food safety in Africa

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The issue

The disruptions created by the COVID-19 crisis have re-emphasized many of the fragilities in food systems including the need to buttress the business case for food safety as a driver of high-quality domestically produced nutritious food brands, capable of competing with imported packaged food. The impact of this crisis on the competent authorities and food business operators (in formal and informal parts of the value chain, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) or major private sector players) to maintain guarantee of the safety of food is huge. In Africa, the impact of physical distancing is even higher considering the importance of "the informal actors in value chains" and market in the trade and distribution of food products. Challenges include accessing safe, nutritious food at affordable prices when movement is restricted or markets close and the vulnerability (both in terms of health and income) of entrepreneurs and employees engaged throughout the food system.

The pandemic has increased focus on many contemporary issues of growing importance such as zoonotic diseases, climate change, food fraud, and the digitalization of food systems each having potentially significant implications for the safety of food. Equally, the importance of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) has drawn greater attention to significance of the extensive and often unnecessary use of antimicrobials in human and animals. Currently, according experts, 10 million people around the world are at risk of being victim of AMR and an estimated 700 000 people die each year from infections caused by microbial agents resistant to all antibiotics.

Another potential impact of COVID-19 crisis on food safety is the potential increase of food fraud. Because of the lockdown, the capacity of competent authorities to undertake appropriate inspection activities has been reduced leaving room for malicious food business operators (FBOs) to undertake deliberate and intentional substitution, addition, tampering, or misrepresentation of food, food ingredients, or food packaging; or false or misleading statements made about a product, for economic gain. Shortages in the supply of products for maintenance and cleaning of equipment and spare parts for machines can have an influence on the adherence by food processors to respect of critical hygiene and food quality rules.

The COVID-19 caused disruptions in food systems also create opportunities for driving their transformation. The crisis has also shown how quickly many parts of the food system especially SMEs and women and youth led enterprises, have been able to respond. Food business operators, competent authorities, and many enterprises have had to deviate from business-as-usual approaches, using alternative approaches such as creating new and more localized markets and producer organizations have found ways (some through digitalization and innovation) to respond to the new demands, reviewing staff occupational health and safety practices, and prioritization of control activities.

Budget

USD 10 million

Time frame

2021–2025

SDGs

2 ZERO HUNGER

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION

15 LIFE ON LAND

Related FAO policy notes on COVID-19

▶ Food Safety in the time of COVID-19

▶ Agri-food markets and trade policy in the times of COVID-19

▶ Preserving African food value chains in the midst of the coronavirus crisis

While working to provide rapid response to the crisis, there is a need for the development of longer-term plans including establishment of emergency response and continuity plans in the member countries to ensure the integrity of the food systems and have appropriate approach toward addressing AMR and food safety issues. These long-term solutions will be supported by food system transformation plans based on new technologies and innovation such as automated and digitalized production. The existing gender gap in innovations and digitalization are critical issues that long-term plans need to take into account.

Although there are no known human cases of COVID-19 that can be linked to foods of any kind including livestock, fish, wildlife, pulses, grains, fruits and vegetables, this pandemic is having a direct effect on food safety risk communication strategies, how to address misconceptions or misinformation, and provide credible sources of information backed by evidence and data.

The food industry normally has Food Safety Management Systems (FSMS) based on the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles in place to manage food safety risks and prevent food contamination. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the current control measures (hand washing and sanitation of food contact surfaces) may need to be revised and updated, based on lessons learned from the present pandemic.

The action

❶ Policy at government level:

- Ensure that food safety is a central pillar of national agriculture investment plans (NAIPs) and perceived by public and private sector alike as a core driver in the competitiveness and expansion of national food industries.
- Establish or reinforce national food control systems including food control regulatory frameworks and implementation strategies, interaction with stakeholders including food business operators (formal, informal, women and youth employment, SMEs), laboratory systems to support surveillance and monitoring activities to address AMR and Food safety issues.
- Develop and disseminate guidance materials to guide farmers, food business operators (formal, informal, women and youth employment, SMEs), and consumers for good practices for the prevention of the spread of the viruses (and other pathogens) in food production and processing environment. Example of guidance materials can include, standard sanitation practices, protection of workers, good staff basic hygienic practices, food workers awareness of COVID-19 symptoms, use of disposable gloves, just to mention a few.

- Maintain the core regulatory functions of the competent authorities to allow them to continue important control activities such prevention of outbreak from known or emerging food borne pathogens, management of food recalls, and prevention of food frauds.

❷ Field level actions

- Compile and distribute reliable information about COVID-19 and its impact on food safety and AMR.
- Reinforce existing control measures on keeping the environment, all equipment, tools and surfaces clean and providing appropriate adaptation taking into consideration the pandemic e.g. public awareness on personal hygiene as essential for food safety and sick people not handling food.
- Engaging in discussions on the establishment of Food Safety Management Systems (FSMS) based on the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) principles for all the manufacturer of foods for human consumption (formal, informal, women and youth employment, SMEs). Specific attention will focus on women as well as norms and standards to overcome the existing gender gap on access to information and services related to food safety and preventing contamination.
- Strengthen capacities of food value chain actors (formal, informal, women and youth employment, SMEs) on the safe use of antimicrobials in food production.

❸ Enabling environment support to member states and government counterparts

- Develop integrated multi-stakeholder dialogue and integrated policies, strategies and programmes that place food safety and AMR at the centre of food systems development through assessment and strengthening of national food control systems, the development of critical emergency preparedness and response and market development and demand for high-quality safe and domestically produced food brands.
- Develop national and regional actions and strategies to reduce AMR and AMU including a continental AMR communication plan.
- Through the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations/World Health Organization scientific expert committees, provide support to member countries in the development of risk-based policy decision-making to ensure that resources are allocated to activities associated with higher food safety risk.
- Develop training manuals covering all relevant technical areas and delivery of training sessions at national and regional institutions through e-platforms, workshops, webinars and mentoring. Special attention will be placed on ensuring equal gender representation at trainings, and a module will be developed on issues and challenges specific to women.

Expected results

- Policy and technical issues relevant to Food Safety and AMR are addressed and integrated in (NAIPs).
- Improved evidence-based (sex disaggregated data) decision making and coordination at national and regional level on AMR and food safety.
- Improved coordination of the management of national and regional food control systems specifically covering regulatory framework and implementation strategies, laboratory system for monitoring of AMR and Food Safety Issues, and interaction with national and international stakeholders.
- Support provided on AMR and Food Safety specifically relevant to:
  - African Union Agenda 2063
  - Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
  - Regional economic communities' gender strategies
  - AU Gender policy, strategy and action plan specifically on digitalization, innovation and trade.

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Partnerships

World Health Organization (WHO), World Organization of Animal Health (OIE), United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), African Union Commission-Africa Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (AUC-CDC), African Union Inter-African Bureau for Animal Resources (IBAR), and other African Union Commission bodies, regional economic communities, non-governmental organizations, veterinary, medical and environment professional societies, Civil Society Organizations and national government representatives from Ministries of Health, Agriculture-veterinary services and Environment, Codex Alimentarius, African Continental Free Trade Agreement Secretariat (AfCFTA)

Programme links

Hand-in-Hand Initiative, Codex Trust Fund 2 (GCP/GLO/893/MUL); Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations support to the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) trade facilitation programme (GCP/INT/387/COM); Improved capacity for integrated monitoring and response to food safety emergencies in Burkina Faso and Senegal (CP/SEN/072/LUX); Support for boosting Intra-African Trade in Agricultural commodities and services to advance the implementation of AfCFTA Agreement (TCP/RAF/3708).

Country focus

Burkina Faso, Cabo Verde, Ethiopia, Gabon, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Rwanda, South Sudan and Togo

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