

Interview with a Focal Point: Malaysia – Anita Anthonymsamy

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In order to facilitate Focal Points to learn from each other’s experiences, FAO interviews Focal Points from various countries to share their national requirement, process and experience on GM food safety assessment. This article features an interview session with Dr. Anita Anthonymsamy, the Focal Point for Malaysia, who is a risk communicator.

Interviewer: Please tell us about you and your background.



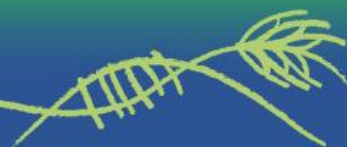
Anita Anthonymsamy (Anita): I am a Research Officer at the Department of Biosafety, under the Ministry of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) of Malaysia. Initially, I joined the ministry as a consultant to help facilitate the implementation of the Biosafety Act. In 2010 I joined the civil service in the Department of Biosafety. I am attached to the Research and Evaluation Section. I have a PhD from Universiti Putra Malaysia and worked on genetic transformation of tropical orchids.

Interviewer: How and why were you nominated by your Government to be the Focal Point to the FAO GM Foods Platform?

Anita: Food is regulated under the Ministry of Health. However GMOs, their export, import and production falls under the Biosafety Act, under the NRE. Thus there is an overlap. When this issue was discussed with both the Ministries, it was agreed that any GMO issue has to be first cleared by the Department of Biosafety as the implementing body for the Biosafety Act. Hence it was decided that the Focal Point should be from the Department of Biosafety and I was chosen to be the Focal Point for Malaysia.

Interviewer: Are you a risk assessor, a risk manager or a risk communicator?

Anita: Our office is really small....we play the roles of all of them! However, in fulfilling my responsibilities as the Focal Point, I am actually a risk communicator. My role is to publish the national decisions on the Malaysian Biosafety Clearing House, as well as on the FAO GM Foods Platform and on the Biosafety Clearing House (BCH) of the Convention of Biological Diversity (CBD).



Interviewer: Do you have guidelines for GM food safety assessment? If yes, are these in line with the Codex guideline for the conduct of food safety assessment of foods derived from recombinant DNA plants?

Anita: We base our GM food safety assessment on the Codex guidelines. We do not have a formal set of guidelines as such, however based on experiences we have a certain set of criteria that we are looking for. We have a template for our risk matrix and the related technical report. The technical report is available for the public.

Interviewer: Can you please explain to us the process of GM Food safety assessment in your country from the submission of the dossier by the applicant?

Anita: After the submission of the dossier to the Department of Biosafety, it goes through a preliminary assessment (both technical and administrative). After it is cleared at the Department level, then it is sent to the Genetic Modification Advisory Committee (GMAC). GMAC is a scientific committee appointed under the Biosafety Act to do assessment and make a decision recommendation to the National Biosafety Board (the decision making body under the Biosafety Act). The Research and Evaluation Section, in the Department of Biosafety is the operational arm of the GMAC and assists in conducting the GM Foods safety assessment. The technical team conducts the safety assessment with the GMAC and prepares all the documentations to make the recommendation about the safety of the GM is made to the National Biosafety Board. During this time, a public consultation is also done concurrently. After the Board has made its decision, the applicant is informed of the decision in writing. The entire process should not exceed 180 days from the time of receipt of the dossier. If the product is approved, the Risk Assessment Report and the National Biosafety Board Decision Document is prepared and made it available on three websites: our Malaysian Biosafety Clearing House, the FAO GM Foods Platform and the Biosafety Clearing House under the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety.

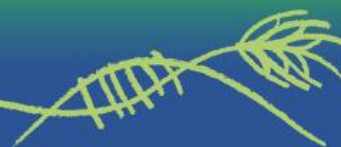
Interviewer: What kind of expertise does the expert committee possess to conduct the safety assessment of GM Food?

Anita: The GMAC comprises of 17 to 19 members and they are mostly from universities and research institutions with expertise such as environmental biology, animal health, virology, molecular biology, to name a few.

Interviewer: Could you tell us a little more about the public consultation process?

Anita: Malaysia approach towards biosafety is to place importance in receiving the opinions and the comments of the public and also make them a part of any decision making process in addition to the technical assessment that is done. It is mandatory under the Biosafety Act to conduct a public consultation before a decision is made for any release of GMOs and its products.

An announcement about this public consultation is published in four national newspapers to inform the public: English, Malay, Chinese and Tamil language newspapers. This announcement is made twice (with a two week lapse in time) in each of the newspapers. The call for the public consultation is also announced on our Department's Facebook page and our Twitter for the benefit of our followers. In addition, a Fact Sheet about the said application is prepared in English as well as the Malay language (Malaysia's national language) and uploaded to the Malaysian Biosafety Clearing House to provide more comprehensive information. When a GM food is assessed for its food safety



for example, a Fact Sheet is prepared with basic and easy to understand information about the safety information, the genes introduced and answers to other Frequently asked questions. The consultation period takes place for 30 days. During these 30 days of public consultation, the comments received sometimes on policy issues and some comments are technical – either way they are useful for us. If any technical concerns are raised through this process, it is directed to the GMAC to consider and edify the risk assessment. A summary of all the inputs received is prepared and submitted to the National Biosafety Board for its consideration in the decision making process.

Interviewer: What are some of the challenges that you face as the Focal Point?

Anita: The challenge with being a risk communicator is the lukewarm public interest in the subject. GM food safety assessment is also a topic which needs to be simplified to ensure accurate and unbiased message gets delivered to the public. This is to avoid the situation of misinformation or misunderstanding on the GM food safety assessment which may lead to irrational fear. Increased public awareness is needed to pique the public interest on the subject and to provide assurance that the safety assessment is done in a rigorous way and based on scientific knowledge.

Interviewer: Do you have any tips for countries with little experience with collecting data from various agencies/ministries on GM food safety assessment?

Anita: It is very important to talk amongst agencies. For example, there is a need for effective coordination between the Ministry of Health and the NRE for the GM Food safety assessment for Malaysia. It is essential to find ways to complement one another and not to place extra burden to the applicants and optimize limited resources available. When you use existing regulatory structures and adopt biosafety in it, people tend to accept it better rather than introducing something completely new.

Another effective tip for countries setting up the GM Food safety assessment framework and guidelines in their countries is that it is not easy to find food scientists who may also be experts in biosafety. Use the available conventional food safety expertise in your country and provide additional training to build the knowledge on biosafety and GMO food assessment. This will enable countries to conduct GM food safety assessment effectively and also eventually be a conduit for communicating about risks related to GM Food safety assessment.

FAO would like to express its appreciation to Dr. Anita Anthonysamy for providing valuable information on the process of GM food safety assessment in Malaysia There are various ways and approaches that can be taken to set up GM food safety assessment process at national level, but for countries with limited experience, the real-life examples can be the best teacher. Visit <http://tiny.cc/fao-gm-mly> to further read about the country profile of Malaysia on GM food safety assessment and review their submitted records.

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