

Addressing Food Safety Issues in Bangladesh through Policy Initiatives - are we there yet?

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Food safety is still a new concept in Bangladesh - for the government, traditionally food security has been the priority, as is the case in so many developing countries. This means that all kinds of seeds, fertilizers, pesticides, insecticides, etc., were used to increase production, regardless of whether they were harmful to humans or not. Additionally, there was a lack of training/understanding of how to use these products. This has led to indiscriminate use of preservatives, antibiotics etc., leading to big issues in terms of Antimicrobial Resistance (AMR) and general safety. In addition to these, contamination and adulteration of food remain big problems in Bangladesh. Basic food items on the market like fish, fruits, oils, vegetables, and sweetmeats are adulterated with hazardous chemicals in an indiscriminate manner. Use of calcium carbide for ripening mango and use of DDT in the processing of dried fish are two common examples. Unauthorized food colors, especially textile dyes are used in food, manufacturing and processing in Bangladesh. There is no food safety at village level due to a severe lack of inspectors, trainers or indeed anybody on the ground. This affects the country's ability to export its agricultural products. International observers stated that the relationship between those inspectors that are available and industry is based on bribes. Food safety is becoming more of a concern for Bangladeshi consumers now, which is happening at a time when not only the buying capacity of the citizens are increasing, but the country is in a transition state from a developing country to a middle income one.

One might suggest to resolve the issue with enactment of strong laws and regulations to mitigate the issues of food safety. Surprisingly enough, Bangladesh probably has the highest number of food safety regulated laws and regulations in the world! There are regulatory instruments in the form of Acts, Ordinances, Rules and Regulations to govern the safety, wholesomeness and quality of food in Bangladesh. Historically, the Pure Food Ordinance, 1959 was the overarching law to govern food safety issues in Bangladesh - this was later merged into the Food Safety Act, 2013. There are separate acts and regulations in almost all areas of the food supply chain. Some of these include Fish Feed and Animal Feed Act (2010), Animal Slaughter and Meat Quality Control Act (2011), The Drug Act (1940), Drugs (Control) Ordinance (1982), Animal Disease Act (2005), Livestock Quarantine Act (2005), Plant Quarantine Act (2011), Consumers' Right Protection Act (2009), Breast Milk Substitute, Baby Foods, Commercially-Manufactured Supplementary Baby Foods and Their Equipment (Regulation of Marketing) Act (2013), Vitamin A Fortification in Edible Oils Act (2013), Bangladesh Hotel and Restaurant Act (2014), Formalin Control Act (2015), The Pesticide (Amendment) Ordinance 2009, Fertilizer (Management) Act 2006 and many others.

It is a common observation that Bangladesh has good policies on food safety now but governance is a big problem, and the implementation of these rules and regulations is lacking - disjointed, lacking capacity, requiring a big change in actors' thought processes and lacking accountability, with corruption rife. In general, the enforcing organizations in the country are resource-poor in terms of staff, infrastructure and general capacity. There are a few food laboratories under various government, autonomous and international organisations in Bangladesh. However, very few of those are operating down to the regional and district level. It was observed that only a few of the laboratories are well equipped and well maintained. They have shortages of maintenance budget, inadequate technological resources, manpower and, above all, lack of coordination in procedures/methods of testing.

The current food control system in Bangladesh involves multiple ministries and agencies. Fifteen ministries are involved in food safety and quality control and ten ministries are directly involved in food inspection and enforcement services. The food inspection and enforcement system in Bangladesh needs to be strengthened to better address the significant food safety issues that exist in the country and better protect the health of consumers. Appropriate inspection manuals, protocols, guidelines and checklists for inspectors to use in the field must be developed. There must be a system for record keeping and documentation of food inspection and enforcement activities. The inspectors should be educated on food safety and food security and they should be provided with appropriate equipment, tools and test-kits for inspection and sample collection. After enactment of the Food Safety Act in 2013, Government of Bangladesh created the Bangladesh Food Safety Authority (BFSA) in 2015, which was a big step taken towards the right direction. Unfortunately, in spite of the significant legal and regulatory mandate, BFSA lacks the appropriate number and quality of resources, in enforcing the act, particularly at the implementation level. With a regulation on its staffing having passed in late November 2018 and they key task now being recruitment - it is expected that this process will take at least one year to complete, if not longer. A key challenge for the newly-formed BFSA is to coordinate Bangladesh's extremely disparate current food safety implementation structure, as mentioned before. Issues of control, budget and not wanting to relinquish responsibility among the different ministries makes this process extremely difficult.

Overall, food safety is still an emerging issue in Bangladesh; it is therefore of crucial importance that, at this time when food safety laws/regulations and the institutions for implementing these are being formed, it is ensured that the approach Bangladesh adopts is grounded in science and that the country develops the capacity to pursue a science-based approach. Clearly, the key institution to work with is the BFSA. It is a new institution embarking on implementing a relatively new piece of legislation (and a new concept for the country) and is a centrepiece in a significant structural change in the implementation, monitoring and enforcement of food safety. Another organization that is very active and interested in pushing food safety forward, representing the interest of the private sector, is BUILD (Business Initiative Leading Development) - representing the Dhaka Chamber of Commerce and Industry (DCCI), Metropolitan Chamber of Commerce and Industry (MCCI) and Chittagong Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCCI). A good involvement for the future of food safety could be engagement with the Bangladesh Agricultural University and its new undergraduate program/BSc on Food Safety Management. Specific engagement could take the form of providing materials, sending lecturers, training of local professors etc. - this course will create the future food safety inspectors for Bangladesh. Overall, it will be crucial to ensure that the multiple organizations involved in food safety are coordinating their efforts better to avoid duplication and fill gaps.

Compliance with food laws and standards is seldom achieved through policing work alone. Food business operators should operate within a business and national culture which seeks to ensure food safety because it is a natural and basic expectation, an integral and vital part of commerce, and not simply a requirement of the law. Government, particularly the newly formed BFSA therefore has to influence and in partnership with key stakeholders in the agri-food, service and hospitality sectors and to build confidence and trust in the national regulatory system through effective risk communication and dialogue with all concerned. It has to bring about the understanding that food safety is to be the norm not the exception. The primary responsibility imposed by food and feed law on these sectors will be to ensure that they have systems in place to guarantee they produce and market food that is safe and which is correctly labelled so that consumers are not misled about the nature of the food they purchase. In order to ensure the establishment and maintenance of high standards of food hygiene and safety throughout the food chain, efforts are needed to work with different sectors of the industry to promote, encourage and facilitate the development of food safety assurance schemes that are based on best practices and standards, and have suitable documented systems in place to guarantee consumer protection. At the same time, food safety awareness programs are also needed for the citizens.