



Food Safety in India: Status and Challenges

Hanzhou Yang

Economic growth, rising incomes, and urbanization have influenced Indians' eating habits. There is increased demand for greater variety in food choices, and Indians are becoming more concerned about food quality and safety. The 2015 withdrawal of Maggi noodles—a top ramen brand in India—has drawn further attention to the food safety situation. Meanwhile, monitoring by government agencies and NGOs has raised awareness and demand for safe food (1).

According to 2015 global estimates of foodborne diseases, “the risk of foodborne diseases is most severe in low-and middle-income countries, linked to preparing food with unsafe water; poor hygiene and inadequate conditions in food production and storage; lower levels of literacy and education; and insufficient food safety legislation or implementation of such legislation” (2). In India, food-borne diseases can be erratic and often go unreported, but in a nationwide 2006 study 13.2% of households reported food-borne illness (3).

As agricultural development is considered a means of fostering rural growth and reducing poverty, India needs to hurdle a number of policy, regulatory, infrastructural, and institutional obstacles and to produce food that meets basic quality and safety standards/requirements.

TCI is therefore studying the current food safety regulation situation in India, including legislation, implementation, coverage, and challenges. By analyzing existing food-safety laws, policies, and regulations as well as collecting relevant academic research, TCI is appealing to the Indian government to upgrade existing food-safety laws, policies, and regulations and calling for more cooperation between organizations and government regulatory entities.

The Food Safety and Standards Act (FSSA) of 2006 was designed to improve the overall food safety of the population and the food trade within and outside the country. The FSSA consolidated

responsibility for food safety in the hands of the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI). In spite of the decade-old transition from the previous food safety laws into the FSSA's integrated standards and regulations, there remain overlapping and residual/pre-existing standards maintained by other regulatory bodies. Clarity is needed if all stakeholders are to conform to FSSA regulations.

In the case of powdered, evaporated, and condensed milks, producers need to meet the mandatory FSSA regulations as well as the compulsory requirements of Bureau of Indian Standards (BIS). Both include standards for hygiene, additives, and limits on contaminants. For fruits and vegetables, FSSA regulations as well as BIS and Agricultural Marketing standards (AGMARK) apply. A detailed assessment of these standards in milk and vegetables indicates that while all regulatory norms base their criteria on the international standards of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (FAO), it is difficult for food suppliers to follow all the mandatory regulations and difficult for customers to discern the differences in food labeling. And if competing national standards were not confusing enough—after all, some standards are mandatory, some are voluntary—there are also state-level marketing regulations with which to contend. This convoluted policy environment is equally difficult for regulators and producers seeking compliance.

As a public policy priority, the TCI recommends that the government address the existing overlap and remove the ambiguity in responsibility and authority of each organization. The government needs to review the BIS and AGMARK standards separately, merge the regulations above into the FSSA, and make clear the boundary between mandatory and voluntary requirements as well as the divisions of responsibility between FSSAI, BIS, and the Directorate of Marketing and Inspection (DMI), which is responsible for enforcing AGMARK standards.

The government should also pay greater attention to developing the relevant institutional and human resources needed to monitor food safety more effectively. The FSSA establishes a national standard, but administration (including licensing, prosecutions for non-compliance, etc.) is carried out at the state level. Compared with the comprehensiveness of and details in food safety laws, the availability and accessibility of food labs needed to implement and enforce food safety laws varies considerably by region; overall there is a lab and testing-capacity deficit. There also are too few specialists with the knowledge and experience required for administering food safety.

To increase the number of laboratories per million people and upgrade the infrastructure and technology, the FSSAI should establish or strengthen existing laboratory collaborations between FSSAI and AGMARK laboratories as well as share laboratory data. The government could also delegate greater responsibility to private laboratories; current regulations could be amended so that only failed samples from the private sector are sent to government labs for referral and final analysis. Regarding human capital, FSSAI and academic organizations should design training programs and provide viable employment opportunities for more people to work in this area.

Finally, our analysis finds that producers,

consumers, food handlers, and even officials lack awareness of food safety and also lack understanding of the regulations that are constantly updated.

Perhaps the biggest challenges facing food industries seeking to conform to food safety regulations is lack of information and lack of clarity. Food Business Operators (FBOs)—especially the tiny, small- and medium-scale industries—find it difficult to identify relevant procedural and compliance changes and they lack the capacity to track regulatory changes. FSSAI should simplify regulations and standards for FBOs at all levels. Standards must be unambiguous and clear. Also, FSSAI should place greater emphasis on training food handlers. Even small steps such as washing hands frequently and wearing gloves could do much to improve the hygiene situation.

While recent food safety scandals have raised awareness among Indian consumers, such awareness is found disproportionately among urban consumers. Rural consumers also deserve safe, high-quality food, and the government can reach them through mass-media campaigns. FSSAI should work with other ministries to raise awareness and educate the public about workplace, farm, and household hygiene as well as safe use of pesticides. When consumers demand safe foods, industry, producers, and food handlers will comply.

- 1 Sulaiman V., R., N. J. Kalaivani, J. Handoo, T. S. Vamsidhar Reddy, K. Dorai, and A. Hall. 2011. "Organised Retailing of Fresh Fruit and Vegetables: Opportunities for Putting Research Into Use." Discussion Paper 12, April, Research into Use Programme (RIU), Department of International Development (DFID), London. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08ac2ed915d622c0008bf/riu-retail-rash-eed.pdf>
- 2 WHO (World Health Organization). 2016. "WHO's First Ever Global Estimates of Foodborne Diseases Find Children under 5 Account for Almost One Third of Deaths." Media Centre, WHO. <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2015/foodborne-disease-estimates/en/>
- 3 Kohli, C., and S. Garg. 2015. "Food Safety in India: An Unfinished Agenda." MAMC Journal of Medical Sciences 1 (3): 131–135.

Hanzhou Yang (hy454@cornelledu) is a Master of Public Administration candidate at the Cornell Institute for Public Affairs. She was an intern at the TARINA Center of Excellence of the Tata-Cornell Institute for Agriculture and Nutrition (TCI) in Summer 2016.

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