

Food quality and safety in the African agro-food industry: some policy implications

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The impact of food quality and safety on human health cannot be over-emphasised. A constant health threat in most African countries is the frequent outbreak of food-borne pathogenic diseases. In recent years, food quality and safety issues have also dominated the relations between African countries and their major international trading partners. The falling prices of export crops is due primarily to failing quality and safety standards. If this trend continues some African countries could lose more than half of their traditional export markets when the World Trade Organization (WTO) regulations come into force.

In spite of this imminent threat, very little exists in the form of explicit national policies or programmes on food safety in most African countries. cursory public statements exist on food safety but no conscious efforts have yet been made at national level to address the issue in a coherent and comprehensive manner. There is also very little policy co-ordination within and among African countries on food safety issues.

The main difficulty confronting African countries in the formulation and promulgation of such policies is the very weak scientific and technical infrastructure upon which they should be based. Besides the lack of reliable data and information very few African countries possess local capability to effectively police and monitor food safety policies. Except in a few countries, there are no internationally accredited laboratories to undertake the type of tests and examinations required to meet world class standards. National standards bureaux are poorly equipped to establish and monitor food safety controls and only limited training opportunities exist for developing the appropriate calibre of manpower to undertake the tasks of surveillance.

The EU and other international agencies have recently begun to urge African governments to build local capability that would be required to meet these challenges, especially regarding export of food crops. A number of research institutes have also embarked on a systematic study of traditional processing methods to provide the hard scientific data that are required to develop suitable standards. They have also embarked on experiments to develop local food safety and quality assurance systems based on recognised international systems for selected staple and cash crops. Nevertheless, these efforts still lack adequate recognition and co-ordination both nationally and regionally to make them effective. This paper reviews some of these efforts and makes recommendations as to how they could form the basis for national policies.