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**NATIONAL FOOD SAFETY SYSTEMS IN THE AMERICAS AND THE CARIBBEAN  
- A SITUATION ANALYSIS**  
(Paper prepared by Guyana)

**Introduction**

In recent years, food safety has become an issue of growing importance at the global, regional and national level because of its impact on public health, trade and tourism; therefore, an effective food safety system is essential to protect the health and safety of the national population. With globalization, it is essential that the country be able to assure the safety and quality of foods so that it does not become a barrier to trade, thus enabling the country to take advantage of opening new markets. It should also be able to ensure that imported foods meet the national requirements.

Guyana as many other developing countries has its difficulties in trying to keep up to date with the constant changing demands of the consumer and of the international regulations due to limited financial, technical and human resources. As a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO) it is obligated to implement the WTO Sanitary and PhytoSanitary (SPS) Agreement entailing the implementation of Codex *Alimentarius*, International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) and *Office internationale des epizooties* (OIE) standards as measures to enhance food safety and gain market access for its products.

As it is, the current food control system of Guyana is fragmented between different ministries and local authorities with duplication of regulatory activities, lack of coordination at the different levels, which leads to an inefficient utilization of the already limited resources.

**Scope**

This document seeks to examine and analyze the present situation of the food safety system in Guyana looking into the above-mentioned deficiencies and to indicate the difficulties faced and the steps being taken to overcome these challenges. Participation of all the major stakeholders both private and public sector was integral for the development of this paper and seeks to give a clear critical analysis of the current situation with regards to food safety in Guyana.

**Legal framework, including basic laws, enabling basic laws, enabling regulations and appropriate implementation mechanisms**

The Constitution of the Republic of Guyana does not expressly address food control and food safety. However, article 40 of the Constitution provides, *inter alia*, that every person in Guyana is entitled

to the right to a happy, creative and productive life free from hunger, disease, ignorance and want, thus articulating the right to food.

Several sectoral laws exist on the statute books. Apart from the Food and Drugs Act (FDA), the following pieces of legislation exist:-Animal Movement Disease Prevention Act, Environmental Protection Act, Fisheries Act, Guyana National Bureau of Standards Act, Municipal and District Councils Act, Pesticides and Chemicals Control Act, Plant Protection Act, Public Health Ordinance, Slaughter of Cattle (Control) Act and the Weights and Measures Act.

The regime does not address the entire food chain - i.e., from farm to table. It is also devoid of reference or regard to the applicable international standards established under the Codex and the *Office international des epizooties* (OIE). Some reforms have been made in the plant and animal health sectors, but new or amended legislation on the subjects is yet to be enacted.

The enforcement regime could be deemed as weak. The present fines are low, and as such non-deterrent; there is lack of manpower for inspections and enforcement, which is weak in the various pieces of legislation. The regime is sanctions-oriented and has no collaborative aspects of enforcement.

### **Food standards and technical regulations**

Whilst there is the need to guarantee safety and quality in foods in Guyana right from the production to the consumption stage, the enforcement of standards is limited to final products. The power to prescribe standards in relation to food is vested in the Food and Drugs Department (FDD), Ministry of Health, under the FDA. However this currently being done by the by the Guyana National Bureau of Standards (GNBS). There is close cooperation between the GNBS and the FDD on the matter, of importance to note is that the director of FDD is the chairperson of the GNBS's technical committee on food. The standardization process is so configured that it allows the authorities with the responsibility for food safety to take lead roles in the standing Technical Committee and implementing the standards. This is one of the effects of the already mentioned fragmented nature of the food control system and proposals have being made to address this issue on the new proposed draft bill on standards.

### **Food-borne disease surveillance systems**

There is no active surveillance system. What can be said is that the system is reactive. What generally happens is that after there is an outbreak the Ministry of Health appoints a team to investigate. The Ministry collects information on food poisoning and food-borne disease that are reported by Hospitals and health centers. The Ministry is in the process of setting up a Surveillance Unit to address this issue.

### **Coordination of activities of all organizations involved in food safety management**

The food control function is not exercised by a single Ministry or agency of state: several Ministries, Departments and Agencies, including the Ministries of Agriculture (MOA), Fisheries, Crops and Livestock (MOCFL), Health (MOH) and Local and Regional Government (MOLRG), are involved in food control. The principal department, however, is the Food & Drugs Department (FDD) within the Ministry of Health. Hence, the FDA is the primary piece of legislation regulating the sale of food.

Apart from officers of the FDD, officials of the Municipal and District Councils also enforce food laws. In the area of meat inspections, the statutory powers on the subject are vested in the FDD, Veterinary Public Health (VPH), Public Health Inspectors (PHIs), and Veterinary Officers and Customs officials. Due

to this fragmented nature of the regime, food control and food safety management is not quite effectively coordinated which can cause inefficiency and overlaps.

### **Laboratory support services for all relevant food hazards**

The Food and Drug Department of the Ministry of Health have the legal responsibility for evaluating food safety. The Department is working toward accreditation of the laboratories. There are laboratories for microbiology, water analysis, food chemistry and drug chemistry. It must be noted that the services offered do not meet the needs of an effective food control programme. There are also other laboratories in the Guyana that play a supporting role.

The Guyana National Bureau of Standards (GNBS) plays a significant role in the certification and accreditation and quality assurance of laboratories in Guyana. The Bureau develops national standards, including food standards, most of which define quality parameters important in commerce. A product certification program is in place to evaluate compliance of products to a GNBS standard.

The National Agricultural Research Institute (NARI) has two laboratories, which have participated in the pre accreditation training activities coordinated by GNBS: The Soil Chemistry Department and the Post Harvest and agro-processing facility. The laboratories at NARI provide services to the internal research projects and to external users in the area of soil chemistry, water contaminants, and food analysis. The soil chemistry laboratory, in addition to soil analysis, does some work in the area of water contamination.

The Guyana Sugar Corporation has well equipped laboratories for soil chemistry and sugar quality. Process control laboratories can be found at each factory, and there is a Central Laboratory that acts as reference laboratory within the Corporation. Microbiological, herbicide residue and heavy metal testing of sugar are not currently done at the estate laboratories. However the Central Laboratory is currently developing its capacity to conduct these tests. The Government Analyst/Food and Drug Department also does independent microbiological testing

The Institute for Applied Science and Technology (IAST) has laboratories equipped for Food Microbiology, Food Technology and Chemistry. The Chemistry laboratory is particularly strong, with an atomic absorption spectrometer equipped with the requisite accessory for mercury testing.

### **Food inspection and enforcement mechanisms at both domestic and international levels**

The FDD and the VPH conducts on site inspection and monitoring of food establishments and factories involved in food preparation and processing. Places found to be deficient in the requirements are closed and items confiscated.

The Plant Health Unit of the Ministry of Agriculture advises on Good Agricultural Practices and pesticide use but is not capacitated to enforce. With respect to fruits and vegetables only those for export are inspected with the farms being registered and produce certified. The Unit is also responsible for the implementation of protocols established between Guyana and other countries. There is no laboratory that is capable of testing for residue levels in plant and animal products such as pesticide and veterinary drugs. The Animal Health Unit is responsible for ante mortem examination of animals, with the directive to confiscate any animal that is deemed unsafe for human consumption. They are also responsible for monitoring and the restriction of movement of animals within the country. Post mortem examination is done by Public Health Inspectors of the Veterinary Public Health Department of the Ministry of Health.

On the international level Guyana as a member of the WTO is obligated to implement the WTO SPS Agreement entailing the implementation of Codex, IPPC and OIE standards as measures not only aimed at enhancing food safety domestically, but also at enabling Guyana to gain access to international markets for her agricultural produce. The GNBS is the focal point for Codex activities and houses the National Codex Secretariat. In 1999 Guyana established a National Codex Committee (NCC) with representation from relevant Ministries, Department and Agencies, consumer groups and academia. The GNBS has, adopted Codex standards on food additives, pesticides and veterinary drug residues.

All food imports have to adhere to the requirements stipulated and should be accompanied with the relevant certificates. Plant and Public Health Officers are stationed at all official ports of entry and ensure that these requirements are met before products are allowed to enter the country.

The FDD periodically samples all food products produced both locally and internationally and analyses. The Analytical procedures are limited to those procedures mentioned above in the Laboratory support services.

### **Product recall and re-export procedures**

There are no explicit instructions in the current law that deal with product recall unless it impacts on human health. However, the Food and Drug Department deals with product recalls. With regards to re-export procedures if the products do not comply with regulations, then there is the option for re-exporting the goods to country of origin. Likewise with regards to animal and plant products, at the port of entry there are plant and animal health inspectors that can prevent products that have not complied with the necessary regulations from entering the country.

### **Training and consumer awareness**

The FAO, EU and Caribbean Programme for human resources development and Economic Competitiveness (CPEC), IICA are among the international organizations that assist in training in the area of food safety and control. Training includes involving the private sector apart from persons from the Public sector. Some of these training include “training of Trainers” programmes, which would enable the persons benefiting to further hold training sessions to a wider target group is met. Training was also done on HACCP and Food Hygiene with both the Public and Private Sector.

The Ministries of Health and Agriculture would during the year hold seminars and workshops, where they would train person on Good Management Practices (GMP), Good Agricultural Practices (GAP), Good Hygienic Practices (GHP) Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) and other food Safety Related activities. The Ministries would periodically produce posters and handouts to ensure consumer awareness on current threats from food-borne diseases.

### **Communication among all stakeholders**

With respect to public and private sector communication the relation can be considered good. They private sector are consulted and invited to meeting which they respond to, in relation to issues involving them.

### **Extent of the use of the food chain approach**

As mentioned earlier there is no regime that deals specifically with the entire food chain. With regards to primary production, farmers are encouraged to utilize Good Agricultural Practices, to limit the

use of pesticides. Monitoring is not particularly effective because there are no means to test for pesticide and veterinary drugs residue levels. Some farmers that export their products are registered with the Plant Health Unit and their products are certified before exporting as in keeping with the protocols established between Guyana and those importing countries.

It is recognized that HACCP systems are becoming benchmarks for international food safety standards and trade and should be made the mainstay of all national food safety regulations. In Guyana mandatory food safety programmes employing HACCP principles are being employed in the Fisheries sector more specifically the Processing plants and whilst it is not mandatory in the Poultry sector as yet, the major processing plant are employing HACCP programmes. With the CARICOM standards on Poultry to come in to affect soon it is expected that all the processing plants will utilize HACCP Principles. The difficulty arises in the limited capacity and knowledge in employing these principles.

### **Challenges faced and approaches used to effectively overcome challenges**

Guyana as a developing country is facing many challenges and is seeking to address these through help from international agencies. As it can be noticed in the report, the Food Safety system is very fragmented as such efficiency is reduced and various other factors are lost resources, time, and money among others. The Government is cognizant of this and recognizes the need to address these and other shortcomings in the food control system, to facilitate trade through protecting the country from negative consequences of exporting unfit and defective foods and to ensure that safe and wholesome food are always available to its populace. Guyana recognizes the need for an efficient import/export inspection and certification regime fashioned along internationally accepted systems. Hence, the FAO project “Strengthening of the Food Control System” in Guyana. At the request of the Government of Guyana, this project was approved by FAO to assist the Government in the establishment of an effective national food control system capable of ensuring the quality and safety of food supply in the country. More specifically, the project intends to provide the country with updated food laws and standards, organized and coordinated food control activities, staff trained and national laboratories capability upgraded, contributing thereby to fostering increased export of food products and safety of the domestic food supply. A Pesticide laboratory is soon to be established by the Pesticides and Toxic Chemicals Control Board. It must be noted that the laboratory will not be fully equipped and funding will be sought to have it completely equipped. The national food safety bill, regulations and standards have been updated in the context of Codex standards and are at cabinet awaiting approval. This will enable Guyana to strengthen the control of food quality and safety for both domestic consumption and international trade.

A communication campaign on food safety has been designed and related material prepared. These materials will be disseminated by year-end. Some more equipment for the FDD Laboratory has been bought to expand the testing capability of the FDD and staff is expected to undergo training so as to have maximum effective use of the equipment recently acquired. The Government is gravely concerned about the quality and safety of food available in the market place both locally produced and imported, and needs to ensure adequate protection to the consumer, promote its food industry and trade exports and develop the tourism industry. To this effect, the Government has promoted the establishment by Cabinet resolution of March 16, 1999, of the National Codex Committee (NCC). The National Codex Committee provides an ideal forum for the stakeholders of the food industry to collaborate in addressing the nation’s food concerns. To realize this not only requires a direct input into NCC, but also significant capacity building and institutional strengthening of the Codex Secretariat. The FAO project was instrumental in the capacity building and institutional strengthening of the Codex Secretariat, which even though still needs to be fully equipped, has now monthly newsletter and email address with the staff trained in the effectively managing the Secretariat. The Government sees the National Codex Committee as a real instrument for the implementation of Codex

standards in the Country. It must be noted that the Codex Guyana has benefited from the Trust Fund to enable participation of Codex meetings.

### **Conclusion**

The Government is very much concerned with the health of its population and is continually seeking help to further improve its food control system. As a developing country there are limited resources available. The need for Technical Assistance for developing country members is emphasized in the SPS Agreement and Technical Barriers to Trade Agreement. It is therefore important that such Technical Assistance be easily accessed so as to enable such countries to meet the SPS measures that these developed countries impose on imports and to provide systems that can effectively monitor the food safety situation in the country.