



Key informants' perceptions and attitudes towards national food control systems: Evidence from two countries of the Southern African Development Community



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ABSTRACT

This study was carried out to assess perceptions and attitudes of key informants towards national food control systems (NFCSS) in developing countries. Two Southern African Development Community (SADC) countries were selected, namely Botswana and Mauritius. The methodology involved qualitative and quantitative techniques. The qualitative method was an in-depth interview of key informants to identify strengths, weaknesses and improvements relating to the NFCSS. The quantitative method involved the use of a 5 point likert scale where key informants were requested to express their level of agreement with attitude statements pertaining to the NFCS. The participants were twenty-two and twenty key informants from Mauritius and Botswana respectively. Specific and common issues emerged from the key informants' evaluation of the NFCS in their respective countries. Strengths, weaknesses and improvements perceived by the majority of key informants in Botswana and Mauritius, were identified. Perceived strengths: regulations are based on international standards; analytical services use internationally recognised methods; participation in international meetings related to food control. Perceived weaknesses: the food laws do not cover primary production; food control laboratories are not accredited; food control administration activities are spread across a number of government ministries with overlapping responsibilities; the lack of code of practice and inspection manuals; implementation of HACCP is not required by the law. Proposed improvements: the law should cover primary production; accreditation of food control laboratories; development of enforcement codes of practice; setting up of a Food Control Agency; the law should make HACCP mandatory. The median of responses to attitude statements revealed common trends in key informants' expressed attitude to most defined NFCS issues. In both countries, most key informants indicated agreement with negative attitude statements and disagreement with positive attitude statements. This research constitutes a starting point for further regional studies to drive harmonisation of NFCSS.

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1. Introduction

Food safety is a global concern. In view of the impact of food safety incidents and rising consumer interest in the way food is produced, processed and marketed (FAO/WHO, 2003), governments and various international bodies have reacted promptly to establish or consolidate their 'Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS)

infrastructure'. The 'SPS infrastructure' is "the totality of the institutional framework, whether public or private, the output of which includes the process of formulating, issuing and implementing SPS standards and regulations and the associated evidence of compliance, i.e., the relevant mix of inspection, testing, certification, metrology and accreditation, in order to improve the suitability of products, processes and services for their intended purposes, prevent barriers to trade and facilitate technological cooperation" (ITC, 2005).

As part of the SPS infrastructure, countries need to establish what is known as a national food control system (NFCS). FAO/WHO (2003) considers NFCS to be an integration of a mandatory

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regulatory approach with preventive and educational strategies that protect the whole food chain. Effective NFCSs are crucial to protect the health and safety of domestic consumers and to enable countries ensure the safety and quality of their foods entering international trade as well as compliance of imported foods with national requirements (FAO/WHO, 2003; FAO, 2007).

According to Vytelingum (2003), evaluation of NFCSs is a routine exercise which governments must conduct to enable system review and update. Continuous evaluation of the NFCS is of utmost importance for pinpointing gaps within the system and seeking strategies to close them (FAO, 2006). Most of the past studies relating to the assessment of NFCSs focused on collection of information from governmental authorities and did not cover all stakeholders: (Al-Busaidi & Jukes, 2015; Al-Kandari & Jukes, 2012; Alomirah et al., 2010; Anyanwu & Jukes, 1991; Chanda, Fincham, & Venter, 2010; Ghaida, Henry, Yves, Tayssir, & Samir, 2014; Jia & Jukes, 2013; Kwak, Jukes, & Shin, 1999; Lin & Yamao, 2012; Lääkkö-Roto & Nevas, 2014; Shukla, Shankar, & Singh, 2014; Smith & Jukes, 1997; Vytelingum, 2003; Yang, Yongzhong, Chen, & Fang, 2012). Thus, there is a dearth of research documenting approaches that integrate stakeholders from various backgrounds in the evaluation of NFCSs or studies that compare FCSs in different countries. According to FAO (2006), comparative analysis of FCSs of countries at different levels of development offers a learning opportunity to determine capacity building requirements and to formulate appropriate policies in a region. To date there is no single study that compares perceptions and attitudes of key informants from governmental and non-governmental backgrounds towards NFCSs in developing countries.

This paper is an attempt to enrich existent literature on the evaluation of NFCSs. The objective is to assess perceptions and attitudes of key informants towards NFCSs in two member countries of the SADC namely, Botswana and Mauritius. This methodological approach is reported as more appropriate, particularly for developing countries where food safety indicators are not systematically collected (Neeliah, Goburdhun, & Neeliah, 2008). Indeed, as Griffith and Redmond (2003) pointed out, it is possible to plan effective strategies to encourage and strengthen the desired attitudes, only when the existing perceptions and attitudes regarding the NFCS are known.

2. Methodology

The mixed methods approach was used to address the objectives of this study. This consisted of a qualitative in-depth interview and an attitude survey of key informants. According to Creswell (2009), the use of mixed methods gives more insight than either form by itself. Furthermore, Jogulu and Pansiri (2011) stated that the methods complement each other in interpreting the findings. A total of sixty key informants; thirty from each country were approached to participate in the study. In Botswana twenty key informants agreed to take part in the study while in Mauritius twenty-two key informants participated. Therefore, 67% and 73% of the approached informants in Botswana and Mauritius respectively participated in the study.

2.1. Criteria for selecting key-informants

Key informants from government and non-governmental organisations dealing with food control were selected. These organisations were affiliated with decision making, enforcement and implementation of policies whilst some were concerned with fighting for consumer rights. The organisations selected are stakeholders within the national food control system. These organisations were government and non-governmental organisations

who had a stake in decision making, food law enforcement (e.g. Health Inspectors) and implementation of food laws (e.g. farmers associations and food processing industries). Key informants were at different levels of qualifications, operation, roles, background and had varied years of experience but held “key” positions in their organisations. Their “key” positions in the relevant organisations reflected their expertise, rich knowledge base and experience in the components and operation of the concerned building block of the NFCS. Combined public and private sector key informants were used to avoid the use of only the public sector informants who could have been subjective. This created a diverse sample, contributing to credibility of their perception and enhancing the validity of results. This diverse sample ensured an accurate portrayal of a balanced view. A total of twenty-two and twenty key informants from Mauritius and Botswana respectively participated in the study.

2.2. In-depth interview with key-informants

Face-to-face in-depth interviews were carried out with key informants. An open-ended interview guide, organised around themes pertinent to elements of a NFCS was used. This allowed an in-depth exploration of key informants’ perceptions on each element. The interview guide was divided into four parts: food legislation; inspection services; analytical services; food control management. The data collection instrument was pretested and then administered to forty-two key informants.

2.3. Attitude survey of key-informants

An attitude survey questionnaire was developed to evaluate the key informants’ attitudes towards elements of a NFCS. The questionnaire contained 30 attitude statements which were presented in a randomised manner with respect to the positive or negative orientation of the statements, to minimise bias. The key informants were requested to express their level of agreement with attitude statements on a five point likert-scale: “1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree”. To identify questionnaire phrases subject to misinterpretations and any flaws in the questionnaire statements, the questionnaire was pretested with a small sample of 5 respondents representing the target population of key informants within the NFCS. After the 5 interview sessions, the interview notes were reviewed and their feedback incorporated into the final questionnaire before administering to the target population. The respondents who participated in pretesting did not form part of the final research participants. The questionnaire was then administered to twenty key informants in Botswana and twenty-two key informants in Mauritius.

2.4. Data analysis

Data collected from in-depth interviews was summarised to represent issues identified by the majority of key informants for areas of strengths, weaknesses and proposed improvements, pertaining to the NFCS of each country. The gathered information was further analysed to explore similar and specific issues to Mauritius and Botswana. For the attitude survey, the median of attitude ratings for each statement was computed using Microsoft Office Excel version 2007. The median of attitude ratings was also determined for governmental and non-governmental organisations.

3. Theory

The subject of NFCS has been extensively reviewed by Neeliah and Goburdhun (2007). The main elements of a NFCS are: food

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