



# Food safety and quality management regulatory systems in Afghanistan: Policy gaps, governance and barriers to success



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 21 November 2015

Received in revised form

8 March 2016

Accepted 15 March 2016

Available online 21 March 2016

### Keywords:

Food law

Food safety

Food inspection

Food sector

Afghanistan

## ABSTRACT

Afghanistan has significant competitive advantages in agribusiness. Much has been said about Afghanistan's unrealized potential in this sector over the years and many specialists have highlighted challenges in infrastructure, access to finance, and inadequate legislation as barriers to growth in the sector. Many have also pointed to its potential productivity increase as a way to help alleviate food security issues. With adequate access to finance and infrastructure, Afghanistan should in theory be a top exporting country in all agricultural sectors. The potential also exists for Afghanistan to be a top exporter of high-margin products like fruits, meat, dairy and vegetable processing. In order to realize this potential, however, stronger food safety control needs to be in place to export to markets. In Afghanistan, food safety practices are still based on experiences from the late 1970s. Companies face constant pressure from the crisis, market competition from importing companies, pricing pressure from retailers, and seemingly endless inspections from government bodies. In fact, there are three main state agencies (Ministry of Public Health, Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock, and Municipalities) that regularly inspect food companies, often performing the same functions and loading these already cash-strapped enterprises with unneeded administrative burden. There are still important issues to be addressed within the food safety system of Afghanistan, such as: complete harmonization of legislation with the regional (legislation and standards mainly), improvement of coordination among authorities; ability to ensure impartiality of inspection work; thorough training of inspectors and implementation of skills, especially towards risk-based inspection control; reform of sampling schemes for food of non-animal origin and imported food commodities; strengthening surveillance of foodborne diseases, control of adulterated foods; and supporting the introduction of self-inspection systems based on HACCP principles and good hygienic practices.

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## 1. Introduction

Since 2001, Afghanistan has made many changes in food sector and food safety inspection: from the no control at border entry points to current control mechanism by both Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) and Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock (MAIL). The process of negotiations with the World Trade Organization (WTO) has improved coordination between different institutions in the way of more frequent meetings and discussions of a food safety law. MAIL has responsibility for control of raw food products and MoPH has responsibility for control of processed food (Quraishi et al., 2012; MoPH & MAIL, 2012). The mandate of the MoPH and MAIL in relation to food relates mainly to risk

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assessment and risk communication which are not well interpreted from policy into action. The Public Health law just states that MoPH is responsible for preventive health (MoPH, 2009) which is not further interpreted in the policy, strategy and implementing level clearly.

Food safety is a shared responsibility (Khalid, 2015). Governments establish food safety policies and they put in place and manage a system of controls that cooperatively aim to assure that national food safety goals are met. National food safety regulations and standards are a fundamental part of the food control system. The modern idea of food control places direct responsibility for ensuring the safety of food on all operators in the food chain (CEC, 2000). They must be able to demonstrate to regulatory authorities that their operations are in line with national guidelines and codes of practice and that their products meet national standards (WHO, 2012). Consumers also play a role in functioning of national systems of control beyond the actual safe handling of food that they

purchase or otherwise obtain: their choices and concerns influence decisions of government and the food industry (FAO, 2006).

The aim of this study was to understand the different functions of involved authorities in food sector, understand the current initiatives of private sector in food safety and as a result propose solutions to the government on problems in the sectors which will improve our existing food regulatory system at policy and implementation level.

### 1.1. Development trend of food sector in Afghanistan

Before 2001, Afghanistan was a country with even not having access to enough food. The regulatory infrastructure was ruined and the Mullahs were regulating the food sector. After the intervention of international society in 2001, the food sector boomed once again. The exports and imports of food commodities increased. Travels of Afghans and the foreigners into Afghanistan took place. The economy of people was slowly improving. All of these resulted in change in the food sector regulatory aspects, trade legal compliance requirements and consumer awareness about what to eat and where/how to buy it. Afghanistan started to get membership of international organizations like World Trade Organization, signed agreements with Food and Agriculture Organization and World Health Organization on food affairs. This resulted a change of mind in both policy making people, consumers and suppliers. In the policy level, MoPH decided to have a food and drug regulatory authority by 2020 (NMFB, 2013; MoPH, 2012) and there is commitment from the higher officials of government. Along this, traders are getting HACCP, ISO 9001, ISO 22000 and other certifications to comply with the market requirement. The same is the consumers, who look for label of food products, quality and safety is prioritized now (Khalid, 2012).

## 2. Methodology

The present study is based on the secondary data published by various agencies and organizations, interviews and direct site observations. The visits as tour were planned for 34 locations. The different locations/institution are categorized into 4 groups. A separate questionnaire is developed for each category. The questionnaire was completed by one of the Food Committee members which was finally used for generating the tour report. The main questions included (1) who do what in food value chain in terms of regulations?, (2) what is controlled and what is not controlled in food sector?, (3) what are the duplications of responsibilities? The tour took 15 working days based on the schedule between May–July 2014. The visit from each location resulted into a list of recommendation for improvement of practices and at the end all recommendation were presented to National Medicine and Food Board for general action on the policy level. In addition, a technical working group assigned by National Medicine and Food Board, worked on SWOT analysis of the sector.

## 3. Results/findings

As per the scheduled plan the team was supposed to meet 34 locations but due to time limit only 28 were visited. During the tour 14 government regulatory institutions, 10 private sector companies and 4 government academic intuitions which are busy in food science education directly or indirectly, were visited.

The main findings of the tour are categorized in as follow:

### 3.1. Findings on regulatory functions

I. Ministry of Agriculture, Irrigation and Livestock - According to the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) MAIL is responsible for the control of raw food products (MoPH & MAIL, 2012). Though, there is no specific definition for raw product. Because on market level vegetables and fruits are not controlled for pesticide residue and other disease (Rahman, 2011). Based on the discussion with MAIL staff, we found out that there are two main directorates involved in the food safety affairs, though it was said that in past MAIL had a quality control directorate which is now thrown away from the organizational structure and its functions are divided between Directorate of Animal Health and Plant Protection and Quarantine Department.

There are two Directorates involved in Food Safety in MAIL:

A. The Animal Health Directorate - responsible for regulation within which the veterinary inspection activities are conducted and control for animal health, safety and hygiene of production of food of animal origin as well as the disposal of animal by-products is done. Inspection covers border and inland inspection with state veterinary inspectors, border veterinary inspectors. Almost all provincial agriculture directorates (DALLs) has animal health officer, carrying out the function of inspector. The educational capacity of these people is to be a Doctor of Veterinary Medicine or technicians in veterinary/livestock production or management.

B. Plant Protection and Quarantine Directorate – in charge of regulation, and, within it, the Division of Pesticides and Phytosanitary Inspections controls plant protection products in primary production and plant health at the border and inland. The primary products are to be controlled but the directorate doesn't have infrastructural, technical and financial capacity to perform the required tests.

### II. Ministry of Public Health

A. Environmental Health Directorate is responsible for regulation and control of food safety for products of processed food. Control is exercised in production, retail and import. The total number of sanitary inspectors in the country is 53. We found out that the Preventive Health Directorate stopped this directorate not to go for inspection to market. The post market surveillance is now delegated to the Provincial Public Health directorates (Hussaini & Rasooli, 2014; MoPH, 2014a,2014b; MoPH, 2011b; MoPH, 2011a).

B. Public Nutrition Department is responsible for dietetic products, food fortification, enforcement of fortification regulations, and production of fortified foods and market surveillance for those foods. In addition, it carry out supplemental food programs and other nutrition activities for solving public health nutrition problems (Aminiee, 2014).

C. Quality Control Directorate is responsible for testing the quality of food and medicine. The team found out that bizarre and strange decisions are made there. Food and water are analyzed by pharmacists. Mostly the tests are by acidity, physical tests, smell, color and some other basic tests. The calibration system is not in place, lab is not certified though it is national central lab which may function in future to accredit others. Overall, the decision made are compromised. The lab has 7 employees and have tested around 800 food samples (Faqiri, 2014; Sultani, 2012a, 2012b).

D. Health Law Compliance Directorate is responsible for ensuring whether health related laws of MoPH are implemented

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