

Draft Concept Note

National Food Safety Policy for Bhutan

Context &Background:

Food safety is an area of high relevance to today's time when we are faced with increasing emerging threats to food safety with hazards and contaminants leading to food poisoning and food borne diseases. An unprecedented number of disease outbreaks have occurred both within countries and internationally. Data on food borne disease outbreak in Bhutan captured through National Early Warning, Alert & Response Surveillance Information System (NEWARSIS) indicate a total of 16 incidents of food borne illness/disease outbreak during 2015 & 2016 alone. In addition, the Annual Health Bulletin 2016 reported a total of 51,593 cases of diarrhea in 2015 which could be related to food borne diseases/illness.

However, Epidemiological data on Food borne disease (FBD) and laboratory capacity to detect the cause of FBD are currently very low in Bhutan. As a result many food borne illness & outbreak often go unrecognized, unreported or uninvestigated. Food Safety is a public health priority and policies & regulatory frameworks to establish and implement effective food safety system is deemed necessary. A strengthened food safety system will not only positively impact the food safety within the country but will also contribute towards a safer cross border food trade.

Further, new and emerging global issues such as the rapid spread of food borne contaminants and diseases, new technologies and threats from domestic and imported food products require a more proactive and coordinated approach for Bhutan's food safety system.

The policy concept note is submitted in line with Section 18 of the Food Act of Bhutan 2005 which mandates the National Food Quality and Safety Commission (NFQSC) to 'formulate policy to maximise industry development, protect consumers, foster trade and improve food control in the Kingdom, by proposing goals, strategies and structures, and by developing annual work plans and programmes for all relevant actors in the food control system'.

The rationale for a standalone food safety policy was presented and duly noted at the Second National Codex Committee (NCC) Meeting held in December 2016 and at the 78th RNR-GNH committee meeting in February 2017. Further, the Organizational Development (OD) Exercise recently carried out for BAFRA also recommended the need to develop a food safety policy.

The proposed policy is deemed necessary as the scope of national food control system is not clearly defined in the food legislations or in any policies related to food safety. The National Food Control System in Bhutan faces a number of challenges such as incomplete food laws and regulations; absence of a national food control strategy; poorly defined and overlapping mandates among agencies involved in food safety & standards; ambiguity in regulating the food import; control of Food-Drug Interface Products (Health Supplements, Special Dietary Products & Nutraceuticals); control of food additives; control of salt and trans-fat in food; control of alcoholic beverages and weak capacity to participate fully in international bodies and agreements governing trade in food. In addition, current global hot topics such as food safety issues related to veterinary drug residues and development of antimicrobial resistance is not reflected in any of the policies and legislations related to food safety.

Consequently, implementation of food safety measures suffers a lot of challenges and set back due to frequent confusion over jurisdiction of agencies with many authorities responsible for the

enforcement of laws covering the same product areas (e.g. food and foodstuff). Some of the ambiguous food issues such as food labelling, food import etc are taking years to see the light of the day owing to ambiguous legislation covering food safety. Attempts need to be made to harmonize all legislation which covers food safety including public health polices & legislations since it is important to assess the risk posed by adulterants, additives and contaminants to the general health of Bhutanese consumers. A food safety policy is needed to leverage resources and correct these anomalies.

Chemical threats continue to exist in food and food products from the application of pesticides, veterinary drug residues and other chemicals introduced intentionally or naturally present in the environment. Examples are the ban imposed on few imported vegetables & seaweed due to alarming level of pesticide & heavy metals beyond the Maximum Residue Limit. Other challenges include the continued emergence of new threats to food safety and consumer health due to changing lifestyle & food habits and increasing food import.

As a food import dependent economy, considering the free trade agreement with India and neighboring countries, the risk of Bhutan becoming a dumping ground (especially for sub-standard foods which are imported) is foreseen in the absence of a sound food safety policy. There is thus a need to upscale food safety system to protect the Bhutanese consumers.

The existing capacities & infrastructure required to handle adverse food safety issue in terms of knowledge, awareness, technology & human resource are currently very low in Bhutan. The country's food safety actions to solve food safety issue have been reactive rather than proactive with an emphasis on end-product analysis rather than preventive activities. There are no laid down policy directives where food safety is concerned.

The numerous inadequacies and challenges outlined above demonstrate the pressing need to have a standalone food safety policy. There is an urgent need to develop & sustain multisectoral approaches & measures to promote food safety to address the current & emerging food safety issues. Further, the 18th Session of National Council on Agriculture policy & strategies also recommended the need to upscale Laboratory testing of food products and strengthen the enforcement of the Food Act of Bhutan 2005 & Consumer protection act of Bhutan 2012 for food safety & quality control.

As such, this policy will intend to address the adoption by relevant stakeholders of food safety measures that are science based and cover the entire food chain from primary production, processing, storage to distribution of food. It will also provide guidance for ensuring fair trade through the movement of safe food in the country.

Further, this policy will also encourage private sectors (Food Business Operators) to take responsibility for food safety and promote consumer confidence. It will also define the scope of the National food control system which would help in establishing a coordinated approach & information network for food safety involving the relevant stakeholders.

Failure to address the above-mentioned issues would compromise food safety implementation. The current gaps & challenges pertaining to food safety would continue to remain which would impact the development of food safety and technical regulations (mandatory standards), service

deliveries, leading to proliferation of sub-standard & hazardous food products in the country which would ultimately negatively impact the health of the Bhutanese population and the economy.

Critique of current policy options & approaches

Existing policies related to food safety (the Food & Nutrition Security Policy (FNS) 2012 and the Biosecurity Policy 2010) have only minimal reference to food safety issues. The FNS Policy mostly focus on ensuring Food Security & Nutrition through four food security dimensions, while the Biosecurity policy focus mainly on biosecurity risks to ensure biosecurity of the country through the protection of public health from zoonotic disease & pest borne diseases.

Both the FNS Policy & the Biosecurity policy have not been able to address number of food safety issues that need to be streamlined and adapted to the current national /international requirements. As of date it has not been able to provide clear-cut policy directions where food safety is concerned. This indicates that food safety when placed under bigger umbrella policy gets marginalized in terms of priority & actions.

Legislation enacted after the Food Act 2005 such as the Bhutan Standards Body (BSB) Act 2012 has also impacted food safety & standard development procedures especially within the area of technical regulations (Mandatory food standards). Boundaries between standards and technical regulations are unclear and not adequately addressed in the BSB Act or the Food Act of Bhutan. There is a need to enhance coordination & communication mechanisms among relevant institution especially in the area of standard development since BAFRA is the National contact point for FAO/WHO- Codex Alimentarius Commission, which is responsible for the Worldwide Food Standards Programme while BSB is a member of ISO (International Organization for Standardization).

Despite concerted efforts, BAFRA has not been in a position to effectively handle cross-sectional food safety issues given the lack of a comprehensive guiding mechanism & policy.

Further, the need for private sector stakeholders to take responsibility for food safety and promote consumer confidence is not reflected in any of the policies or legislation related to food safety.

In addition, with World Food Program (WFP) phasing out by 2018 and the Ministry of Education (MoE) taking over the school feeding program, the upcoming challenge is foreseen in the area of ensuring food safety in the school feeding program. The MOE intends to request BAFRA to play a major role in monitoring the safety of the food supplied to all the schools in the country throughout the supply chain.

Similarly, monitoring of food safety in Government institutions & Monastic bodies (besides food business) is also challenged as these areas are not clearly covered by the food legislation which focuses more on commercial food.

Food safety issues being a global concern, many international organizations recommend member countries to have a food safety policy to ensure important policy direction and proper national regulatory framework. Bhutan being signatory to International Health Regulation (IHR) 2005, it is a requirement that a food safety policy is in place to facilitate food safety control. Further IHR also

recommends functional multisectoral collaborations for food safety events and risk based food inspection services. The World Health Organization (WHO) also recommends all member states to have a national food safety policy/plan of action in place by 2017.

Most recently, the High level Codex & INFOSAN Advocacy meeting held in September 2016 with international experts from FAO, WHO & INFOSAN (International Network for Food Safety Authorities) noted “the pressing need for a standalone food safety policy for Bhutan to ensure food safety in terms of priority & Actions”

Food safety being cross cutting in nature, the absence of a clear guiding policy, with specific goals and strategies will lead to programmes being planned and executed in isolation and this will not address the issues required to mitigate current and future risks to food safety.

Therefore, a food safety policy is required for the long-term management and control of food safety that commands consumer confidence and ensures public health. Through this proposed policy, it is critical for Bhutan to establish a shared vision between stakeholders of the principles and objectives that will define the country’s food safety system.

Policy Recommendations

In keeping pace with the rapid changes in food systems and to provide effective measures to mitigate current and future risks to food safety, the proposed Policy would identify the principles, goals and strategies to guide the strategic development and prioritization of the programs that will define the modern food safety system. It will also provide a framework for what government perceives as their roles and responsibilities, and those of food businesses and consumers in ensuring the safety of the food supply.

The food safety policy will be guided by the following principles:

1. Strengthening the existing national capacities & infrastructure to handle food safety issue in terms of knowledge, awareness, technology, budget & human resource.
2. The food safety system must balance the need to protect the public’s health, maintain cultural practices and support food businesses’ competitiveness both domestically and internationally.
3. Food safety programme/activities must be implemented in multisectoral, integrated farm-to-fork approach that needs cooperation, collaboration and coordination among all Ministries/agencies involved, as well as awareness and active participation of stakeholders in the food chain.
4. Consumers have a right to be informed and the responsibility to store and prepare food safely.
5. Food businesses have the primary responsibility for the safety and quality of their products and have to provide a reasonable level of descriptive product information to allow consumers to make informed decisions.
6. Government has the responsibility to :
 - Set and enforce standards pertaining to health and safety based on sound scientific risk assessment and management principles

- Ensure that food products produced in the country or imported are safe and meet quality standards
- Develop and deliver food safety information and training to the food businesses industry and consumers
- Interact internationally and represent the interests of Bhutan's consumers and food businesses
- Ensure that risk based inspection system will be followed to prioritize in the area of highest risk
- Ensure the elimination of gaps and overlaps in services
- Implement a planned and coordinated emergency response system that will effectively mitigate food emergencies such as food recalls and food borne illness outbreaks

Following are some of the key policy recommendation that the proposed food safety policy will aim to address:

1. Define the scope of the national food control system
2. Attempt to harmonize all ambiguous legislation covering food safety
3. Identify the challenges in implementing food safety issues and propose recommendation to leverage resources and correct these anomalies.
4. Enhance Bhutan's obligation to international agreements on safe food for which the country is signatory to ensure fair trade practices in the local and the international market.
5. Support the implementation of food import control
6. Ensure FBOs have the primary role & responsibility to ensure the safety of their product.

The benefits to consumers, food businesses and government targeted through this policy are:

- Greater assurance of the safety and quality of the food supply
- More efficient and effective use of human resources through reduced regulatory burden
- Better scientific capacity in institutions and human resources
- Enhanced protection from product misrepresentation and economic fraud
- Improved market access
- Redirected resources to risk based inspection systems
- Reduced gaps and overlaps in government services
- Improved stakeholder communication and cooperation

Besides the above-mentioned benefits, Bhutan could achieve major cost reduction by ensuring food safety for the general Bhutanese populations which would also assist on reducing the health burden of mostly non- communicable disease currently being borne by the Government since research has shown that food contamination has links to cancers.

It is foreseen that the implementation of the policy would entail cost in terms of creating awareness & sensitization on the policy and initial investment in upgrading the food safety system including the food laboratory services.

Integration of GNH and cross cutting issues

The proposed Policy recognizes the values of accountability and equity particularly in regards to maintaining cultural practices and respecting the needs of food businesses, large and small, and consumers. It intends to promote self-reliance and sustainability through a wide range of food safety activities including education, training and empowering the self-reliance of food businesses and consumers.

As this food safety policy is geared towards managing the country's food safety system to protect the health of the Bhutanese population from unsafe food it will also address a number of challenges pertaining to agriculture, health, trade, environment, climate change and private sector development.

The process and indicative timeline

This policy concept paper is being drafted in-house by BAFRA with support from PPD. Following approval of the concept paper, a task force constituting relevant stakeholders from within as well as outside the Ministry will be formed to develop the food safety policy. However, the services of an international Technical Assistance may also be required to provide best international practices & experiences.

Way Forward - Plan and Timeline for Actions to be taken

Event	Timeline Date	Responsible
Concept Note developed	March 2017	BAFRA/ PPD
Submission of Concept Note to RNR-GNHC for approval	April 2017	BAFRA/ PPD
Submission of Concept Note to GNHCS for further review and comments	April 2017	BAFRA/ PPD
Incorporation of comments and Submission of final revised concept to GNHCS and Cabinet for endorsement	May 2017	BAFRA/ PPD
Formulation of draft policy document in consultation with relevant stakeholders	August 2017	PPD/BAFRA
Submission of Draft Policy to GNHCS for review and comments	September 2017	PPD/BAFRA
Incorporation of comments received GNHCS	October 2017	PPD/BAFRA
Wide circulation of draft policy for comments from relevant stakeholders	October 2017	PPD/BAFRA
Incorporation of comments and finalization of revised draft Policy and submission to GNHC for approval	December 2017	PPD/BAFRA

Risks Foreseen

No major impediments or risks are foreseen in the development of this policy as it addresses the need of the hour and relevant stakeholders will be consulted while drafting the policy.

