Foreword

This report presents a collection of regulatory responses at regional, national and international levels to ensure food safety during the pandemic. The pandemic brought additional challenges in the food safety domain in both advanced and less advanced economies. Advanced economies, where food security is not usually a challenge, had not felt the scale of such a sanitary emergency in recent history – this made managing the crisis all the more challenging. In less advanced economies, on the other hand, infrastructure and technological limitations have made economic recovery more arduous. Despite the resilience displayed by food supply chains, the pandemic has placed several additional burdens on food business operators to ensure that food supplies continue at pre-pandemic levels while applying additional lockdown, social-distancing and safety rules. Emergency laws were passed in several jurisdictions, including the EU, to prevent regulatory processes from being unduly hampered or from unjustifiably hindering business activities.

In addition to the evaluation of fast-tracked regulations passed during the pandemic and to the assessment of burdens, regulators willing to secure economic recovery will have to strike a delicate balance between reducing administrative burdens and ensuring high levels of food safety. As has been found in this study, reducing inspections, introducing self-compliance models or making inspections remote have not reduced food safety. Yet, moving forward, regulators and policy makers will have to ascertain how to apply and enforce rules in a post-pandemic world. Questions related to food safety are often complex and, at times, strategically important. This is because the risks associated with food safety can be multidimensional, linked to other socio-economic and environmental factors. This is perhaps one of the important lessons from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Whatever the scenario, the COVID crisis has once again stressed the need for co-operation and risk-based, simpler and proportionate regulation. A risk-based assessment of current control plans and activities will need to be carried out to ascertain whether they are fit for purpose and can withstand the fallout from a global crisis.

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