

Introduction

The reliability and safety of the food supply are fundamental to the existence and preservation of human societies, and food safety thus remains a prominent concern of citizens and policy makers, even in advanced economies where the quantity of supply is of less concern. Thus, from the onset of the COVID-19 crisis, ensuring that food supplies remain both reliable and safe has been a key issue, even if made considerably less visible by the urgency of the health crisis created by the virus. Regulatory systems have had a critical role to play in this context – ensuring continued safety, while removing (as much as possible) barriers that may make it more difficult for the industry to continue operating in spite of the crisis.

The origin of the pandemic is (though still largely uncertain) probably connected to the food chain, with virus transmission from animals to humans apparently linked to a food market in Wuhan. The presence of live animals, and of species presenting particular health risks, is in itself an issue that corresponds to difficulties in improving food safety (and implementation of food safety rules), in China and other emerging markets. Moreover, the consumption of “wild” meat may itself be linked to shortages in the supply of other meats, possibly linked to challenges in animal health or to the fact that wild meat is often an affordable primary source of animal protein and a source of cash revenue to economically weaker sections in several developing nations. Reliance on wild meat may also have been triggered by ecological reasons such as deforestation and loss of food resources. Again, even if the precise causal links for COVID-19 emergence are not fully ascertained, there have been a number of other zoonotic episodes in China and other developing countries, showing the importance of the food chain for epidemiological risks.

Managing the crisis and limiting pandemic spread has proved very difficult, particularly in countries that did not have recent experience with major epidemics of respiratory diseases. Changing behaviour at work and in social life has been challenging, leading to repeated spikes in contaminations and fatalities. Learning from existing experience in supporting behaviour change is thus of particular importance, and the food industry (with major change in practices over three decades) is a valuable source of such learning.

Despite the resilience the food supply chain showed during the pandemic, the events of the past year have also placed a great burden on food business operators (and specifically their workers) to continue supplying the population in spite of lockdowns and quarantines, and/or while complying with new rules on physical distancing and contagion prevention that may require significant changes in production processes. In some cases, major outbreaks have taken place at food production facilities, showing the difficulty to reconcile occupational health / public health with food supply requirements in this crisis situation. It also has created new challenges for state regulators and private certifiers alike, in terms of how to operate in times of lockdown and social distancing.

Human health and resilience need to be strengthened against lifestyle diseases such as heart diseases and cancers (which are linked to the food we eat) and reduce immune response to illnesses such as COVID-19. In addition to this, economic recovery will also have to be promoted by supporting in all possible ways the food sector, including through reduction of administrative burden – while ensuring food safety in the most efficient and effective way possible through a risk-based, compliance-supporting regulatory delivery system.

This report looks, successively, at the links between food safety and animal health, and pandemic emergence, and what we can learn from this to try and improve food safety in a developing/transition context and contribute to managing better zoonotic risks. It then considers how the lessons learnt from spreading a “culture of food safety” over the past couple of decades helped in fostering behaviour change to better reduce pandemic risks, at a time when the COVID-19 crisis has shown how difficult it can be to achieve widespread safer conduct throughout industries and society. In its third chapter, it considers how regulatory systems as well as third-party certification systems have adapted and responded to the crisis. The final chapter looks into how regulatory reform in the food safety sphere can support economic recovery and resilience in a sector, which is particularly crucial from a social perspective.



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