

# **4 Optimising food safety regulatory systems for economic recovery**

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This chapter discusses the opportunities that the COVID-19 crisis presents to rethink and optimise food safety regulation for the recovery. The pandemic has stressed the importance of reducing administrative barriers but also the need for regulations that effectively foster safe practices. Food supply systems showed resilience due to governments' rapid implementation of temporary measures. Prioritisation and reduction of the number of physical controls did not lead to a safety crisis, and this highlighted the need for greater optimisation and efficiency of controls, and recognition of results of food safety management systems. Progress in technology and data management can help respond to the need for more co-operation and collaboration among control agencies and improved information exchange to improve efficiency and effectiveness of control measures.

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## Introduction

Regulation played a role at nearly every stage of facing the global health crisis and, going forward, will be a critical element for social and economic recovery. Across policy fields, the pandemic made the need for trusted, evidence-based, internationally co-ordinated and well-enforced regulation particularly acute (OECD, 2020<sup>[1]</sup>). Governments adapted their use of regulatory management tools, including regulatory impact assessments, stakeholder engagement and *ex post* evaluation and removed a number of administrative barriers to improve regulatory delivery (OECD, 2020<sup>[2]</sup>).

As described in the previous sections, the COVID-19 pandemic created various specific challenges to food businesses related in particular to supply chains integrity and workers safety. The pandemic showed the benefits of risk-based control systems which helped regulatory agencies cope with reduced physical inspections. Against this background, authorities responsible for food safety regulation used a diverse range of approaches to combine safeguarding the safety of the food supply and adapting to the major difficulties created by the pandemic, including regulatory easement and enforcement through new tools. Over the past years, countries have made major progress in cutting red tape for citizens and business, putting in place more transparent and better regulations, and ways to deliver them. The health crisis and its social and economic aftermaths present a new opportunity to further rethink and optimise regulatory practices and frameworks, including around food safety.

This chapter discusses briefly the impact of COVID-19 on international food trade, consumer preferences and food safety incidents, assesses challenges faced by control agencies and provides recommendation for simplification of regulatory and management processes. The underlying thread for such efforts should be to make food safety regulatory systems more thoroughly risk-based, and improve transparency, communication and stakeholders engagement so that the problems with consumers' (and businesses') trust can be addressed (see Box 4.1). This should be guided by lessons from research and experience, which have helped understand better the drivers of compliance in food safety, and thus better distinguish regulatory instruments that are effective and efficient, from others which may bring more burden than benefits (Blanc and Macrae, 2021<sup>[3]</sup>).

### Box 4.1. Loss of trust in European consumers

The EIT Food TrustTracker study, conducted in 2020 on 19,800 consumers across 18 European countries to measure trust in the food system, showed that farmers are mostly trusted when it comes to fairness and openness of practices (67% of consumers asked trust them and only 13% do not), followed by retailers (53% trust them vs 20% that do not), while 47% of respondents reported trust in regulatory authorities and 46% in manufacturers (while the mistrust expressed was of 29% vs 26%). In relation to the safety of food, 55% of consumers asked consider food as generally safe and 22% as not safe, with over 40% of customers in Turkey, the Czech Republic and Romania regarding food as generally unsafe.

Source: EIT (2020): Food Trust Report. See [https://www.eitfood.eu/media/news-pdf/EIT\\_Food\\_Trust\\_Report\\_2020.pdf](https://www.eitfood.eu/media/news-pdf/EIT_Food_Trust_Report_2020.pdf).

## Challenges faced by food safety regulators during the COVID-19 crisis

The changes observed in 2020 implied that businesses needed to modify their suppliers' management, health and safety procedures and cleaning programs and, in many cases, had to adapt to online sales. Regulators provided guidance to businesses on how to update food safety programs to accommodate for COVID-19-induced changes. The UK Food Standards Agency published an information package to support food businesses with COVID-19 challenges. This included the *Reopening checklist for food*

*businesses during COVID-19*,<sup>1</sup> as well as updated guidance for restaurants offering takeaway and delivery.<sup>2</sup> Similar guides were published by the US FDA, the Greek Veterinary Authority, the Jordanian Food and Drug Agency, the Serbian agricultural inspection, among others. The *FAO Guidance for food businesses* (FAO, 2020<sub>[4]</sub>) comprised explanations on how to implement basic distancing and provides for cleaning, disinfection and personal hygiene requirements. The International Finance Corporation published a Threats Analysis and Critical Control Points Workbook for businesses to update their food safety management plans (International Finance Corporation, 2020<sub>[5]</sub>) The *FAO Guidelines for livestock production and animal health* (FAO, 2020<sub>[6]</sub>) aims at providing practical recommendations to businesses on how to update good farming practices based on the new situation. Recommendations relate to changes in suppliers, on the need for e-communication with suppliers and buyers, on biosafety and biosecurity measures needed to prevent human contamination with COVID-19 in the farm, on prevention of animal diseases, as well as on cleaning and disinfection and personal hygiene practices.

Control authorities faced various challenges, such as the lack of human resources due to sick leaves and the need to support health systems, reduced testing capacities in laboratories, difficulties to access inspection data by officers working from home, frequent lockdowns' imposed changes in the inspection plans, food safety incidents and high number of complaints regarding foods sold online and increased pressure by customers, media and governments regarding food security and safety (FAO/WHO, 2020<sub>[7]</sub>).

Since many businesses decided not to reopen, the control plans of food control agencies needed to be updated. The FSA instructed businesses in the UK to notify all reopenings through the notification platform. Only in countries where businesses had the opportunity to notify their opening/reopening online, did control agencies have the time to adjust their control plans. Having a risk-based classification of facilities helped control agencies to prioritize controls in a situation where physical inspections had to be kept to a minimum. As a rule, slaughterhouses did not close and in EU Member States due to *ante-* and *post mortem* control, physical inspections were conducted. Veterinary control authorities continued the inspection of slaughterhouses in Italy and Greece but suspended in other food business operators and performed physical inspection only when food safety incidents occurred. In cases when complaints did not indicate that food safety is jeopardised, control bodies postponed physical inspection and relied on their historical data on compliance of businesses and on proof which businesses provided online.

Risk assessment also helped control authorities to continue monitoring programs for pathogens (animal diseases and zoonosis) as a measure of preventing immediate threats and postponed pesticides monitoring programs.<sup>13</sup> Extension services and provision of advice were possible only via phone or the internet. In the UK, FSA did not carry out audits of the voluntary certification scheme Scores on Doors, and instead extended the validity of the already issued marks.

The need for traceability stems from both business and control agencies' side. Should Norwegian salmon producers not have a solid traceability system, they would have not been able to protect their brand from the Chinese control agency's claim that Sars-CoV-2 virus or its particles were found in one consignment of the Norwegian salmon. **Traceability, once again, proved to be the key for investigating outbreaks and performing efficient recalls when FDA investigated a multistate outbreak of *Listeria monocytogenes* infections and linked it to enoki mushrooms imported from Korea. On the other hand, insufficient traceability data, associated with low capacity for strain isolation, prevented Venezuelan control agencies from identifying the source of the *Salmonella* outbreak in 500 people.** Furthermore, consumers' preferences for more organic, locally sourced and sustainable products require detailed traceability data.

Control authorities are faced with the need to control products sold through e-commerce and to perform more efficient recall, both in the conventional and the online supply chains. **The** Canadian inspection agency traced bake food over-fortified with vitamins and sold through the internet to the producer Isagenics and performed an effective recall.<sup>3</sup> In the UK, meat products (lamb, goat, veal, beef), were supplied to retailers and sold directly to consumers by an unregistered and unapproved Wiltshire based vendor

through Facebook. The products did not meet the compliance requirements in terms of food hygiene, safety, labelling and traceability requirements and recall was difficult to perform.<sup>4</sup>

Food and supplements sold via the internet were consistently found to be advertised as immune boosters, or allegedly as a prevention means for COVID-19. In many countries, there were no specific regulatory provisions for food sold online, and only regulations dealing with consumers rights regulated this area. FAO clarified the issue and indicated that all food safety requirements automatically apply to food sold online.<sup>15</sup> Due to the change in ingredients and recipes, many businesses, had an issue with meeting labelling requirements. Health-related rules for production of very small quantities are just as burdensome. In Serbia in order to support the operation of newly opened small businesses, regulators issued an exemption from approval for producers of small quantities of food of animal origin, based on the regulation regarding flexible approach to structural requirements. FDA issued temporary policy changes and allowed small farms to sell out of their local community.<sup>5</sup>

Businesses that produce alcoholic beverages required new licenses to start production of medical alcohol, detergents and sanitizers. FAO suggested that instead of going through lengthy approval procedures, in such cases, businesses should be allowed to switch to new production through the process of temporary regulation<sup>13</sup>. This approach was adopted by regulators in the UK, Ireland and by the US FDA to allow the alcohol beverages producer William Grant & Sons to start production of hand sanitizers.

## **Simplification of food safety regulations and inspection measures: Lessons learned from COVID-19 crisis**

This section discusses how to use experiences gained from COVID-induced challenges to improve food safety regulation and the control approach on a long-term basis. Where relevant, this section builds on the *OECD Best Practice Principles for Regulatory Enforcement and Inspections* (OECD, 2014<sup>[4]</sup>) and its Toolkit (OECD, 2018<sup>[5]</sup>), both instruments that provide guidance on how to create an effective and resilient regulatory enforcement and control system. They can serve as best practice guidelines to discuss the different lessons learned in the COVID-19 response and as a basis to set recommendations for the future.

### *Ensure that food safety regulation is adaptable to change*

Risk based and flexible regulations: Regulatory systems based on the risk paradigm allowed food businesses to keep their products safe by performing risk assessment of all materials and processes, which needed to change, and by updating their food safety plans to accommodate these changes (Box 4.2). Although such changes were sometimes associated with food incidents, it has to be investigated how prevention of contacts, but also stricter cleaning and disinfection requirements, reflected the frequency of gastrointestinal pathogens transmission through food.

#### **Box 4.2. Creating an agile framework for compositional requirements: an example from Canada**

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) has developed an amendment to the *Food and Drug Regulations* to ensure that food compositional standards are more responsive to changes in technology or consumer demand and to ensure that industry innovation is not slowed down. The initiative was developed in collaboration with Health Canada and is part of the Forward Regulatory Plan: 2020 to 2022.

The developed amendment proposes to use incorporation by reference to allow food compositional standards to be maintained and updated in an efficient, timely and transparent manner. This initiative has already been included in the Food Labelling Modernisation consultations from 2013. The initiative

is intended to use modern regulatory tools to help foster industry innovation while also protecting consumers from deception and enable more informed purchasing decisions.

A more agile approach to food compositional standards within the *Food and Drug Regulations* is expected to result in a more efficient response from the CFIA to industry and consumer requests for change. In addition, it should contribute to cooperation efforts by facilitating alignment of Canada's compositional standards with international standard setting bodies and major trade partners. The proposal will undergo public consultation in fall 2021.

Source: <https://www.inspection.gc.ca/about-cfia/acts-and-regulations/forward-regulatory-plan/2020-to-2022/creating-an-agile-framework-for-compositional-standards/eng/1605050017299/1605050226227>.

The crisis revealed that flexibility is not embedded in all regulations. When faced with such a case, regulators must be ready to issue temporary solutions. Systems based on technical regulations, the changes of raw materials, and inputs or technological process can only be amended for a particular product. This is because this is a lengthy and costly process and to solve the problem, regulators must devise new strategies (World Bank Group, 2014<sub>[8]</sub>). Even the systems based on general principles and risk-based regulations have to use temporary regulation to allow local producers to sell products outside of the designated local boundaries. Examples of temporary regulations introducing easements or additional flexibility include the US FDA's "temporary policy"<sup>6</sup> or extensions of licenses' scope to allow distillers to also produce hydro-alcoholic solution, in a number of countries.<sup>7</sup>

The crisis context has also put in starker light the problems created by fragmentation of the regulatory system, with overlapping layers of rules and institutions. While frequent difficulties are reported by food safety regulators in terms of having sufficient resources to conduct official controls effectively (European Commission, 2020<sub>[9]</sub>), these resource constraints often reflect institutional fragmentation and duplication, or inefficiency of internal and external processes (e.g. linked to the registration or approval of food business operators, etc.). Such fragmentation also leads to significant issues in terms of regulatory consistency and predictability (Drozd et al., 2018<sub>[10]</sub>).

Assessing the number of inspectors in charge of a regulatory area (in this case, food safety) is difficult. Indeed, in spite of data on employment in public administrations being generally public, many countries, institutions or services do not keep specific track of inspectors or staff with inspection powers and functions, or do not have consolidated information on all the institutions involved in a given regulatory field. The complexity of regulatory delivery systems where national/federal, state/regional, local/municipal services all can be simultaneously active in a given field makes the task even more challenging. So does the fact that a given regulatory area can be covered by several services, but also that one given service or institution can be, in some countries, active across more than one regulatory field – in which case estimates of resource allocation between these different mandates is not always available.

For these reasons, the OECD Secretariat has so far **been unable to present** full data for all OECD members, and even when data is available in some areas, it is not always present for all. The preliminary results of this work show that available resources are often considerable, but may be spread across a number of institutions. They also indicate that there are sharp variations in "intensity" of supervision in terms of number of inspectors by inhabitant, worker, or enterprise, even between neighbouring and otherwise comparable data. This all shows the importance not only of continuing such research and covering more countries and regulatory fields, as well as obtaining more detailed data, but also for countries to conduct such exercises periodically and systematically to review whether the institutional framework and resources are still fit-for-purpose (see Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1. Comparison of inspection staff resources in selected countries and regulatory fields**

Country	Food Safety	OSH	Env't	Total	Total population	Total businesses	Businesses w/ 10 or more employees	Inspectors/ 100 000 population	Inspectors/ 10 000 businesses	Inspectors/ 10 000 businesses w/ >10 empl.
Austria	2 648	311	120	3 079	8 901 064	410 934	41 940	34.6	74.9	734.1
Finland	810	320	753	1 883	5 525 292	302 901	21 206	34.1	62.2	888.0
France	10 598	2 566	1 890	15 054	67 098 824	3 981 673	160 638	22.4	37.8	937.1
Germany	10 338	5 218	4 374	20 063	83 166 711	2 801 787	361 943	24.0	71.1	550.6
Greece	1 581	629	104	2 314	10 709 739	770 002	29 741	21.6	30.1	778.1
Italy	13 446	6 691	1 002	21 139	60 244 639	3 834 079	176 038	35.1	55.1	1 200.8
Lithuania	720	231	38	989	2 974 090	212 893	13 831	33.3	46.5	715.1

Source: official statistical data compiled by OECD Secretariat.

Overall, the crisis shows that food safety regulations and regulatory delivery should be further developed towards a more risk-based, more flexible and less fragmented system, so as to support businesses and increase their compliance. Regulators need to allow businesses to: a) be aware of, and understand, all key regulations applicable to their business; b) avoid discrepancy in risk assessment and management of the same problem in different regulatory documents; and to c) avoid over-regulation by creating risk based and proportionate norms which will allow fast reaction to crisis while keeping the same level of food safety. This regulatory flexibility follows the OECD recommendation for having norms which are risk-based, more proportionate and simpler in order to allow businesses to address urgent needs.

### *Rethinking the approach to regulatory delivery of food safety regulation*

As a result of lockdowns and other restrictions due to COVID-19, and the reduced capacity in laboratories, inspections and monitoring plans were either partially realized or fully postponed. As per FAO and WHO recommendations (FAO, 2020<sup>[6]</sup>) (FAO/WHO, 2020<sup>[7]</sup>), monitoring plans for animal diseases continued while national bodies were left to decide when to resume, and to what extent, activities related to plant protection monitoring. Authorities adopted specific guidance to allow for such flexibility (see Box 4.3).

Engaging third parties to perform inspections and relying on data from efficient food management systems (such as FSMS certification) can help improve resilience of regulatory inspections and achieve overall reduction in the frequency or emergency suspension of checks and visits. In Croatia, the practice of having official veterinarians trained to perform *ante* and *post-mortem* inspection in slaughterhouses dates from the 1990s (Miskulin et al., 2012<sup>[11]</sup>), and, similarly, in Finland<sup>8</sup> veterinarians perform control of animal welfare on a local level. This is in line with Regulation EC 625/2017, which stipulates that official control bodies may delegate audits and inspections (and not actions in case of non-compliance) to a body or a natural person if they have the knowledge, experience, human capacities and equipment, and are impartial and free of conflict of interest when performing their duty according to the instructions provided by the official control body. For the third-party body, additional request is to be accredited. FSMS certificate issued by accredited body is considered as a factor that decreases the risk of a food facility in the Italian province of Lombardy and in Denmark.<sup>9</sup>

### Box 4.3. European Commission Implementing Regulation on temporary measures to facilitate official controls on food and feed law in view of COVID-19

In March 2020, the European Commission published an Implementing Regulation on temporary measures given the issues found in the performance of official controls – including the lower capacity and ability to perform physical checks and testing, and to issue and sign official certificates.

Based on the Implementing Regulation, Member States can implement the following measures:

- Official controls may be performed by one or more persons specifically authorized by the competent authority, based on their qualifications, available by any means of communications. Such persons, however, must act impartially, without any conflict of interest.
- Any activity linked to official controls on official certificates and attestations can be carried out on an electronic copy of the original of the document, or on an electronic format of the certificate produced in the Trade Control and Expert System (TRACES). The original of the official certificate must be submitted when technically feasible.
- Analyses, testing or diagnoses may be performed by any laboratory designated by the competent authority on a temporary basis.
- Physical meetings with operators and their staff, combined with official controls and techniques, may be carried out via any available means of remote communication

Source: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/txt/?uri=celex:32020r0466>.

In times of crisis, but also in regular situations when there is shortage of staff and other capacities, prioritisation of control plans should be considered and then preference given to those which prevent and control immediate threats (Box 4.4). Use of third-party audit and inspection results may help realize inspection plans, while at the same time help manage human resources and costs. At the same time, the use of FSMS certificates as an indicator of good compliance will stimulate businesses to implement standards and engage more in self-control.

### Box 4.4. Redefining priorities in official controls in the COVID-19 crisis context in Italy

Based on the European Commission's Implementing Regulation of March 2020 (Box 4.3), the Ministry of Health in Italy provided instructions on the control activities by Regions and ASLs (local health authorities) that had to be deferred, and on which others could not be halted – based on their economic impact and the need to guarantee animal well-being.

While controls related to the prevention of African swine fever and avian influenza were initially considered mandatory, scheduled controls for state prophylaxis and activities related to genetic selection plan for sheep and goats were for instance put on hold.

A certain number of controls were maintained, including:

- inspection activities at slaughterhouses
- ante-mortem inspections outside the slaughterhouse in case of emergency slaughter
- official control activities related to the management of the food and feed alert system (RASFF)



In addition to these national measures, Campania provided ASLs with additional guidelines based on the needs and characteristics of the Region. Certain activities were considered non-deferrable:

- follow-up controls for food diseases, export certifications and surveillance of activities related to food safety and veterinary public health
- health checks for brucellosis and tuberculosis (differently from what stated by the Ministry of Health, the Region passed this measure given the status of the emergency in the region)

To reduce risks of contagion, the region of Campania further established that:

- ASLs should adopt measures such as organisational solutions to favor single inspections instead of several control activities, favor more remote checks using national and regional IT systems
- A new procedure for the management of internal audits in the regional health system was to be envisaged, providing for audits to be carried out exclusively remotely with the use of web platforms. This includes "on-site" visits to establishments, farms and facilities being audited in addition to interviews and collection of documents

Source: Ministry of Health of the Italian Republic - Note No. 5086 of 02.03.2020; Note No. 6249 of 12.03.2020; Note No. 10585 of 7.05.2020; Note No. 13173 of 10.6.2020; Note No. 155517 of 10.3.2020; Note No. 163029 of 13.03.2020; Note No. 189403 of 10.04.2020 ; Note No. 198902 of 21.04.2020; Note No. 251127 of 27.5.2020; Executive Decree No. 227 of 01.07.2020.

### *Ensuring that contingency and crisis management plans remain fit for purpose*

A number of authorities responsible for food safety control relied on contingency and emergency management plans to carry out their functions while facing the COVID-19 crisis (Canadian Food Inspection Agency, 2020<sup>[6]</sup>). Due to shortage of staff, lack of laboratory capacities and other relevant restrictions, those plans had to be changed *ad-hoc* (FAO/WHO, 2020<sup>[7]</sup>). The COVID crisis was unprecedented and control bodies could not have anticipated the level of disturbances. Experiences show that future emergency control plans should rely more on cooperation between agencies in international trade, to avoid disproportionate measures not based on risk (such as export and import bans).

Future contingency, emergency management and monitoring planning needs to be stress-tested for situations where human and testing capacities are reduced and where logistical problems impair the implementation of any strategy. They have to include the risk assessment of discontinuation of some of the plans and prioritisation of control activities.

### *Streamlining and simplification of procedures for registration of businesses*

The UK experience with online notification of facilities, for instance the re-opening and online change of data in the database of registered/approved facilities, as well as, the effort to simplify measures concerning very small businesses, or businesses trading online, can be seen as a step towards simplification of registration procedures, but also, as a strong support to control bodies' planning inspections based on accurate data.

Experience e.g. from Ethiopia show that food safety is not jeopardized when licenses for retailers are extended without inspection (FAO, 2020<sup>[12]</sup>). In Greece, before the Law on licensing was introduced, a pre-condition for starting and operating a food business was the issuance of a license based on the results of an inspection, no matter of the type of business. The license was time limited and required renewal, based on inspection. Simplification of processes to open a food business, and revision of licensing policy proved to boost Greek food start-ups and did not impair food safety.<sup>10</sup>



Food control authorities should engage in digitalisation of food business registration, but also in reducing the number of licenses needed to start a food business (see Box 4.5). Experiences of countries which perform *ex ante* inspections only in facilities which need an approval, should be used by those where *ex ante* inspections require engagement of control staff, unnecessarily extend time for- and increase costs of starting a business.

#### **Box 4.5. Simplifying requirements related to agricultural activities during the COVID-19 emergency: the experience of Trento, Italy**

Based on a decree (<https://www.politicheagricole.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/15284>) of the Ministry of Agricultural, Food, and Forestry Policy in Italy aiming at facilitating agricultural activities as part of the food supply chain the Autonomous Province of Trento issued local regulations with temporary measures to ease the operation of agricultural businesses.

Some measures encompassed the *suspension of legal requirements*, such as the obligation for farmers to notify authorities about works carried out on the land, or the *suspension and extension of deadlines* to comply with obligations, e.g. those related to organic food production with European subsidies.

Other measures implied a *simplification of procedures* to obtain authorisations (e.g. related to discounted agricultural fuel) or an *automatic renewal of existent permits*, such as the authorisation to acquire, use and sell phytosanitary products and to perform consulting activities related to those products.

Another solution was to adopt *alternatives for farmers to comply with the law*, by allowing for instance training to be conducted online. The Province also adopted options for citizens to ensure their own supply of food: citizens not operating as farmers were authorized to grow food for their own consumption without having to comply with the relevant legal requirements.

Improving regulatory delivery has been a priority for the Province of Trento since 2012. These examples of their response to the COVID-19 emergency illustrates this commitment in streamlining and eliminating requirements not needed from a risk-based perspective.

Source: <http://www.trentinoagricoltura.it/Trentino-Agricoltura/COVID-19-Disposizioni-ed-informazioni-utili>, Decree n. 3318 of 31.03.2020, Vademecum for agriculture activities Covid-19 of 27.04.2020, Provincial law No. 603 of 8.05.2020 and No. 381 of 20.03.2020).

*Control should be focused on risks and proportionality and regulation method should be that of responsive regulation*

Previous knowledge concerning producers/importers' compliance, may help decide on whether there is a need to physically conduct inspections or if samples for testing will suffice, and, if by doing so, the samples can be prioritised.

Use of self-administered checklists and communicating the results of self-audit to control agencies was recommended by FAO to reduce physical contacts between businesses and inspectors as a direct result of the COVID crisis. The US FDA and the Irish food safety control authorities, for instance, decided to develop such checklists, and use communications from businesses about results of their self-control when discussing with the control agency the reopening of its facilities. In regular situations, control agencies may use self-control data in combination with historical data on business' compliance, to postpone inspection and reduce the frequency of physical control. Physical inspection will remain needed in case of proven food safety incidents.

Risk proportionate control is recommended for border control. Then, trust in producers and importers, derived from good previous inspection records and the level of equivalency between the regulatory and control systems in import and export country, should govern the type and frequency of control (FAO,

2015<sup>[13]</sup>). The US foreign food facility inspections approach identifies products in compliance with the US regulations and foresees potential food safety problems before products arrive in the USA. The COVID-induced recent Chinese experiences with relaxation of import and export procedures, based on the knowledge of importers and/or producers, is another example, which indicates how import control can better target potential non-conformant consignments.

### ***Information integration improves efficiency of control***

Online pre-announcements of shipments are a common practice in USA for all imported consignments. Equally, in EU, the TRACES system allows shipments of animals and food of animal origin to be electronically submitted to relevant inspection bodies. Using electronic certificates or scans and by utilising the interconnectedness between control agencies, inspection clearance processes were accelerated, the number of papers was reduced, and so was the number of contacts between inspectors and owners of consignment. Both practices increased efficiency by reducing costs and allocating resources appropriately the number of persons involved in the control of each consignment was minimised.

The need for healthier food and overall food safety persists. Consumers are expected to seek proof of authenticity (locally produced products, organic, those with controlled and geographical marks), as well as, proof that production has been performed in compliance with environmental sustainability standards. Any claims related to authenticity cannot be investigated if products are not traceable and digital tools can be useful in demand side traceability quests (Baragwanath, 2021<sup>[14]</sup>). Regulatory agencies should facilitate data sharing (trans-boundary) to accelerate the investigation of potential frauds. More information regarding traceability will ensure better identification of products in the supply chain. The new technology used to capture data, such as Blockchain, can process a huge amount of data and be very useful for tracing such products, but it becomes obsolete when data is inconsistent. The first step towards more consistency will be to support businesses in implementing global standards, such as GS1. The second step would be better data governance. For example, standardized collation of data and sharing of IT platforms for communication of data between control agencies. An example of such a platform is in the EU Administrative Assistance and Cooperation System (AAC system), which helps agencies share data on trans-border non-compliance. AAC system is in line with the Regulation EC 625/2017 which requires collaboration between agencies and information exchange. This system (or some similar platform) may be used to investigate transboundary incidents associated with food and especially with that sold online.

### ***Reality check***

Reduction of costs and smart working will be prioritised in the future. Control agencies should explore the regulatory and practical solutions to lay the foundation for smart working. In order to do that, data privacy rules and procedures in agencies must allow inspectors to access the inspections' data. For instance in Australia,<sup>11</sup> a system of dual identification has been implemented which allows officers to access the inspection databases, via mobile phones. This has been used since 2019 and has been proved to be both secure and efficient.

Stakeholders' satisfaction (businesses and public) should be the object of such reforms. Regulatory and control bodies are expected to safeguard the resiliency of food safety systems, to face all existing and new hazards and non-food related crises likely to affect food security. In the post-COVID era, the tendency to reduce burden incurred by businesses concerning the costs associated with official controls, will become even more prominent given the reduced annual profits. This highlights the need to improve understanding of businesses' self control systems and recognition of process testing results, instead of succumbing to excessive sampling and testing of official samples.

## Conclusions

The COVID crisis stressed the need for risk-based, simpler, more efficient, and proportionate regulation. To achieve efficient control, cooperation and data sharing between businesses and control bodies must be prioritised. Since hazards will continue to appear, the capacity of the public and private sector to assess risk and to adapt to new situations by employing the best management solutions, will determine whether provisions can be secured at affordable prices. The new international trade channels require enhanced traceability, but also the use of new technological solutions for data collation and sharing of information.

Online trade requires transparent regulations and collaboration between agencies to monitor food incidents and oversee the management of possible solutions. Increased digitalisation of control operations will help overcome the need for more staff, equipment, support, smart working and accelerated processes, thereby enabling repositories to assess, analyse and estimate data of future trends.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.food.gov.uk/business-guidance/reopening-checklist-for-food-businesses-during-covid-19>.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/working-safely-during-coronavirus-covid-19/restaurants-offering-takeaway-or-delivery>.

<sup>3</sup> <https://healthycanadians.gc.ca/recall-alert-rappel-avis/inspection/2020/74287r-eng.php>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.foodsafetynews.com/2021/01/fsa-issues-warning-about-safety-of-meat-sold-on-facebook/>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.fda.gov/media/138316/download>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.fda.gov/media/138316/download>.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. <https://www.gray-robinson.com/article/post/2469/fda-and-ttb-temporarily-lift-regulations-governing-hand-sanitizer-in-light-of-covid-19-allowing-distilleries-and-unlicensed-manufacturers-to-produce-alcohol-based-hand-sanitizers> and <https://www.ft.com/content/e7c02232-67a5-11ea-800d-da70cff6e4d3>.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fvets.2020.00077/full>.

<sup>9</sup>

[https://www.foedevarestyrelsen.dk/english/Inspection/Inspection\\_of\\_food\\_establishments/Pages/default.aspx](https://www.foedevarestyrelsen.dk/english/Inspection/Inspection_of_food_establishments/Pages/default.aspx).

<sup>10</sup> Unpublished research by the OECD Secretariat and the World Bank Group.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/publications/Documents/fsanz-annual-report-2019-20-accessible.pdf>.

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