

Lebanese food industry challenges, food safety governance and promising private initiatives.

Fidele El Achkar

Department of Biochemistry, University of Lebanese, Hadath, Lebanon

Abstract

As the economies of developing nations change, it is important for regulations to evolve accordingly. Developing economies tackle issues of sustainability, food safety and the need to implement reliable food assurance systems meeting the international requirements.

The Lebanese food safety law that aims to reform the way the government handles food safety issues was approved back in 2015. Although the political situation in Lebanon is still hindering the implementation of this law, the Food Safety Lebanese Commission (FSLC), established in 2019, will help set the standards that should be met by local food productions.

Key words: Lebanese food industry, Safety governance, Local food productions

Accepted on 06 October, 2021

Introduction

In the Arab region as well, although several countries have taken steps to upgrade their food safety systems, the capacity and efficiency of many countries still need to be enhanced in order to assure an adequate surveillance of local produced and imported food, as well as to demonstrate compliance with food standards in export markets [1].

On top of that, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the food industry with more challenges.

The Lebanese food industry specifically is struggling to deal with the challenges of the financial crisis adding on it the COVID-19 pandemic [2].

Besides governmental responsibilities to undertake approaches enhancing the quality and safety of the food system, the private food industry sector has been struggling for some time and relying on private initiatives to increase production quality, consumer protection and promote trade of the Lebanese food products [3].

Some of these initiatives are company based, while the others are projects funded by multinational NGOs or startups funded by entrepreneurship ecosystems [4].

One of the startups under development is trying to introduce a new approach for solving food safety challenges that food producers face for export. The startup is an online platform that aims to help the MSMEs food manufacturers get answers to their food safety & quality struggles by creating a community that connects them to sector-specific experts [5].

With more similar private initiatives creating business & social impacts, and the support of governmental authorities, the result will be a regain of confidence in the safety and integrity of the Lebanese Food System nationally and worldwide.

Materials and Methods

As the economies of developing nations change, it is important for regulations to evolve accordingly. Developing economies tackle issues of sustainability, food safety and the need to implement reliable food assurance systems meeting the international requirements.

In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the situation is aggravated by the underreporting of foodborne illnesses and diseases. Importantly, there is very limited public authority or ministerial oversight over food handling practices and hygiene in some countries of the MENA region (e.g. Lebanon, Syria, Egypt).

In the Arab world specifically, although several countries have taken steps to upgrade their food safety systems, the capacity and efficiency of many countries still need to be enhanced in order to assure an adequate surveillance of local produced and imported food, as well as to demonstrate compliance with food standards in export markets.

Despite differences among the diverse countries in this region, it is clear that there are common challenges they all face to mitigate and achieve what should be one of the 21st century goals for their region: offer safe food to their consumers and increase perceived value of their local food products to open international markets, especially the EU market.

In fact, planned and implemented risk-based food safety system is not as common as it should be. There is a lack of fully harmonized basic food safety standards, requirements and regulations. Additionally, there is a deficit on CODEX and GFSI compliance. This restricts the local food sector to trade within their region and causing their conditions extremely challenging to export. Common political instability are also factors that can derail or sabotage the most well-intended

implementation of strategies and policies designed to enhance food safety.

The Lebanese food safety law that aims to reform the way the government handles food safety issues was published back in 2016. This law is designed to help the country prevent and mitigate the issues presented above.

Although the political situation in Lebanon is still hindering the implementation of this law, the Food Safety Lebanese Commission (FSLC), established in 2019, will help set the standards that should be met by local food productions. FSLC is expected to play a similar role in the development of food safety in Lebanon such as FDA regulatory agencies in other countries.

In a recent webinar gathering some of the Lebanese food industry players from manufacturers, ministries representatives and scientists, they were asked about the challenge food manufacturers used to face before the Lebanese crisis and COVID-19 pandemic:

80% agreed that the lack of support from the government and the public sector is one of the most important challenges faced, followed by import high costs (60%), local production costs (60%), lack of access to information and data, such as regulations and standards, to export the food products (40%), and the lack of proper tools and professional support to execute the process (40%). Few others find that high costs of consultancy contracts (10%) and export rejections (10%) are also issues food manufacturers used to face.

On top of all the above, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the food industry with more challenges. The Lebanese food industry specifically is struggling to deal with the challenges of the financial crisis adding on it the COVID-19 pandemic. Many sectors and exported products have been at the forefront of this emerging issue. Facilities have been temporarily closed or working in rotations with less physical working hours and more remote working hours.

Results and Discussion

Same webinar attendees were asked about the challenges they expect to face now more than ever as a result of the Lebanese crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic:

83% expect that import costs & materials availability will be one of the highest risky and challenging issues. 67% agreed that the lack of support from the government and the public sector will still be a problem, followed by export issues caused by the lockdown (58%) and higher local production & operational costs due to the crisis (58%).

As well, the lack of access to information and data, such as regulations and standards, to export the food products (33%), the less availability of quality personnel and consulting freelancers or companies (33%) and the high costs of consulting contracts (17%), definitely translate the need for more sustainable, practical and specific solutions.

Besides governmental responsibilities to undertake approaches enhancing the quality and safety of the food system, the private

food industry sector has been struggling for some time and relying on private initiatives to increase production quality, consumer protection and promote trade of the Lebanese food products.

Some of these initiatives are company based, while the others are projects funded by multinational NGOs or startups funded by entrepreneurship ecosystems.

FoodSight is a new Lebanese startup within Berytech-Agrytech accelerator program funded by the Embassy of The Netherlands. FoodSight is trying to introduce a new approach for solving some of the many food safety challenges mentioned above.

As an online platform, FoodSight aims to help the MSMEs food manufacturers get answers to their food safety & quality struggles by creating a community that connects them to sector-specific experts. This includes offering a library where the manufacturers can now check documents, decrees, standards and regulations needed to produce safe food and at the same time, export to outer markets. Something that they struggled to access, putting on a lot of effort and time. A sector, product and destination oriented advisory is the core of the

platform's services, helping implement procedures and standards based on demand for certain projects. This happens through creating a pool of experts from diverse profiles, matching each project's request with the right expertise to support the work on it.

What makes FoodSight special is that it is the first online food safety mover in Lebanon and the MENA region that acts as a 1-stop-shop platform combining the food industry knowledge with the professional support. Its vision is to create business and social impacts within the food industry, engaging food industry stakeholders, helping in enhancing the food safety culture and opening freelance work opportunities for regional experts and food technology scientists.

Conclusions

FoodSight's promise is to keep connecting food manufacturers with the highest quality professionals and to help get the best solutions when it comes to food safety. FoodSight is reachable on www.food-sight.com and on social media accounts.

With more similar private initiatives creating business & social impacts, and the support of governmental authorities, the result will be a regain of confidence in the safety and integrity of the Lebanese Food System nationally and worldwide.

Countries in MENA region that find it highly needed to upgrade their food safety practices, find also a benefit, not only for their citizens' health but as a vehicle of economic growth by uplifting food products exports and reducing board rejections. Cooperation among public entities, private companies, organizations and trade associations would certainly improve their potential opportunities for success.

References

1. Bansal P, Bonger W. Deciding on ISO 14001: economics, institutions, and context. *Long Range Planning J.* 2002; 35: 269–290.
2. Berry M, Rondinelli D. Environmental management in the pharmaceutical industry: integrating corporate responsibility and business strategy. *Environmental Quality Management.* 2000 9:21–35.
3. Boltic Z, Ruzic N, Jovanovic M, et al. Cleaner production aspects of tablet coating process in pharmaceutical industry: problem of VOCs emission. *J Cleaner Production.* 2013;44:123–132.
4. Bos-Brouwers HEJ. Corporate sustainability and innovation in SMEs: evidence of themes and activities in practice. *Business Strategy and the Environment.* 2010;19:417–435.
5. Boxall, A. The environmental side effects of medication. *European Molecular Biology Organization (EMBO).* 2004; 5:1110–1116.

*Correspondence to

Dr. Fidele El Achkar

Department of Biochemistry,

University of Lebanese,

Hadath,

Lebanon

Phone number: 70910632

E-mail: fidele.el.achkar@gmail.com