

AVI COMMENTARY

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Food Safety Readiness in Cambodia: Challenges and Government's Response

SOTH Sereyboth^a

SRUN Marnick^b

Foodborne illness is still a major obstacle hindering a country's socioeconomic growth, international trade, tourism, and national economy. According to a [WHO's report in 2022](#), almost one in ten people in the world, accounting for an estimated 600 million, fall ill after eating contaminated food and 420,000 die annually. Moreover, low and middle-income countries lost US\$110 billion annually on productivity and medical costs caused by unsafe food consumption.

Based on a [2019 report of the Mekong Institute](#), the Cambodian Department of Drugs and Food documented 134 foodborne disease outbreaks between 2014 and 2019, resulting in 5825 sickness cases, 5598 hospitalisations, and 119 fatalities.

[Data](#) collected from 266 patients at three different hospitals and health facilities in Cambodia revealed that 65 patients got food poisoning, 198 got acute diarrhoea, and two suffered from typhoid. Costs associated with consuming unsafe food, such as medical, non-medical (travel and transportation), and indirect costs (unproductivity at work), were estimated at around US\$ 62 per case. Therefore, food safety is an urgent matter that needs to be addressed. This article examines challenges in food safety and the government's efforts to address them. It also provides some recommendations for further improvements.

Law and Government's Roles

Considering that food safety greatly affects several functions of a country, the Cambodian government has devised several interventions. The government made a major progress to have the food safety law endorsed by the King on 18 May 2022 for implementation. The law has 11 chapters and 43 articles to protect consumers from food-related issues.

Six ministries, including the Ministry of Health (MOH); the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF); the Ministry of Tourism (MOT); the Ministry of Commerce (MOC); the Ministry of Industry, Science, Technology & Innovation (MISTI); and the Ministry of Economy and Finance (MEF) are responsible for different stages of the food supply chain.

^a **SOTH Sereyboth** is a government official at the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation Training of the National Institute of Science, Technology and Innovation.

^b **SRUN Marnick** is a government official at the Department of Technology Research & Development of the National Institute of Science, Technology and Innovation.

At the production stage, MAFF is responsible for the safety and quality of agricultural goods (raw materials) as they enter the food chain. MAFF officials inspect phytosanitary concerns, agricultural chemical residues, animal health and sanitation, and agricultural goods. For the processing stage, the responsibility is on MISTI.

MISTI is responsible for quality assurance in manufactured and industrial products. It inspects processed food samples and conducts laboratory microbiological and/or chemical analyses on various items, including bottled water, beer, wine, salmon, soy sauce, and vinegar. The results of the analytical tests must be satisfied before licenses are issued.

The consumption stage is under the responsibilities of three main ministries. The Consumer Protection, Competition and Fraud Repression Directorate-General (CCF) of MOC inspects the food safety of exported goods and local markets. For MOH, it is responsible for elements of public health, including ensuring the safety and wholesomeness of food sold in Cambodia. The Department of Drugs and Food under MOH guides the development of a fully integrated food control framework that includes all stakeholders in the food supply and food control chain. MOH is also the focal point for the Asian Expert on Food. For MOT, its primary duty in food safety is registering, licensing, and inspecting food outlets such as food courts and restaurants throughout Cambodia, ensuring they meet MOT's requirements. Lastly, MEF's General Department of Customs and Excise takes the lead in facilitating food safety inspections at international border checkpoints.

Challenges

Even though the Cambodian Government is striving to push food safety standards to a higher level, [many Cambodian people](#) are not yet aware of or have limited knowledge about these standards. Thus, the implementation of the food safety law is not an easy task. Some small and medium-sized food enterprises are family-owned and have limited knowledge about food safety standards.

Furthermore, [businesses reported](#) difficulty in finding employees knowledgeable about food science and food safety regulations throughout the supply chain, manufacturing cycle, branding, and marketing. They also stated that they faced difficulty in finding reputable and affordable service providers in the country who could provide such services.

Meanwhile, consumers are unaware of how unsafe food can cost them a huge sum of money. For example, they may get ill after consuming food from street vendors who do not apply food safety practices because they do not know the importance of safe food. As a result, consumers get diarrhoea and long-term negative health effects.

Solutions

Food safety practices such as cleaning cooking ingredients properly, wearing gloves and head, using enclosed boxes to protect from dust, and using clean equipment by food vendors have health benefits for consumers, including low-income people such as construction and garment workers.

Raising public awareness about food safety is key to overcoming the challenges. One of the most effective ways of raising awareness is to advertise through media (newspapers, magazines, social media, and television channels). Nowadays, as more and more people get

access to the internet, social media should be the most effective way to communicate the messages through short videos or animations.

Another cornerstone for raising public awareness is education. Food safety knowledge should be integrated into the education curriculum at the primary level. Moreover, food safety training programmes should be provided regularly to not only food SMEs but also the public. Some food SMEs need to understand Cambodian food safety standards clearly, which most seem reluctant to do. Because compliance with food safety standards may cost food SMEs extra money, the public-private partnership is another significant catalyst to speed up this process. For instance, SMEs need support from the government to achieve certification and receive more effective training programmes to boost their business growth.

Building food safety taskforces across all the supply chain stages (production, post-harvest, processing, packaging and labelling, storing, distributing, product testing, and food safety standard training) can contribute significantly to Cambodia's achievement of the food safety goal.

Lastly, the Cambodian government should organise a food safety day event in Cambodia to connect different stakeholders for knowledge sharing and fruitful discussion.

Benefits

In terms of economic benefits, individuals will save more money than waste on medical expenses due to food poisoning or chronic diseases caused by unsafe food. Furthermore, they will be more productive at work, bringing about effective results that generate more profits.

For food SMEs' benefits, they will have more customers, thus generating more income. They will also build their reputation when people consume their food safely, who will tell their buddies to come too.

For the Cambodian government, economic development will be more sustainable when the citizens are healthy, richer, and more productive at work. Additionally, when more food SMEs comply with food safety standards, more local products can be exported, and more tourists will come to Cambodia to taste authentic Cambodian food without concern. As a result, new jobs and more income will be generated for the Cambodian people, which is good for the prosperity and progress of the nation.

The views expressed are the author's own and do not reflect the views of the Asian Vision Institute.