

COVID-19 compels new food safety norms in Asia

June 12 2020



A public market vendor in the city of Manila. New protocols need to be set up to ensure the safety of sellers and buyers in the time of COVID-19. Credit: Local Government of Manila/Public domain

Food safety practices in Asia-Pacific countries got a boost from COVID-19 concerns as lockdowns and restrictions start easing up in the region, a webinar held on 3 June heard.

Co-convened by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO), the webinar attracted nearly 1,000 participants from governments, academia and [consumer groups](#), among others.

While experts have repeatedly stated that there is no evidence that COVID-19 is transmitted through foods, [consumers](#), concerned about their health, want to see [appropriate measures](#) in place when they visit markets, restaurants or order food online. That includes physical distancing, awareness of hand hygiene and the use of hand sanitisers by all operators and food handlers.

"The final food product is the result of a chain of actions," Sridhar Dharmapuri, a senior food safety and nutrition officer at FAO in Bangkok, tells SciDev.Net, "In international trade, buyers and sellers will want to ensure that [safety] measures are well implemented across the supply chain, including handling, processing, packaging, storage and retail."

SDG 2 or Zero Hunger aims to ensure that by 2030 all people, especially poor and vulnerable groups, have access to safe, nutritious food all year round. Yet low- and [middle-income countries](#) are estimated, in aggregate, to experience a productivity loss of US\$95 billion per year as a result of unsafe food, according to a [2019 book](#) published by the World Bank.

"The Safe Food Imperative argues that much of the health and economic burden of unsafe food can be avoided through preventive measures, investments and behavioural changes adopted from farm to fork," notes the book.

Lack of hygiene, partly due to inadequate sanitation facilities, leads to

the presence of pathogens in food, which are the single largest cause of food-borne diseases in Asia, according to a 2015 study coordinated by WHO. In the Pacific island states, the presence of parasites is a major cause of food-borne illnesses.

As lockdowns and restrictions start easing up in the Asia-Pacific, countries should focus more on increasing awareness, emphasising the importance of standards and good practices and delegating implementation to the [private sector](#) and to consumers, says Dharmapuri. "The [regulatory framework](#) is of course important, but the implementation needs to be participatory and less top-down."

Governments could focus on infrastructure, such as cold chain facilities, hygienic markets and improved sanitation while providing an enabling environment for the private sector to implement food safety measures, says Dharmapuri. That includes adopting international food safety standards like Codex. Small and medium enterprises and those in the informal sector, including street food vendors, would also benefit from improved standards.

"Food safety needs to become an attitude and part of the culture; and we can see that in countries which are famous for food tourism—they are very aware that implementing [food safety practices](#) attracts customers, enhances incomes for business and promotes well-being for consumers," says Dharmapuri.

Vishal Bhatia, guest panelist at the webinar and head of a leading app-based food delivery service in India, said food control systems need to ensure safety measures across the chain so that the final product that reaches the consumer is safe. India has seen a massive jump in consumers resorting to app-based food delivery as result of a strict, two-month lockdown now being eased.

"The information from the webinar was useful as it can assist in adopting similar strategies to make sure that Fijians have access to safe food," Seema Shandil, one of the participants and CEO of the Consumer Council of Fiji, tells SciDev.Net. "While many businesses in Fiji spend money to improve food safety, some remain ignorant of [food safety](#) laws and employ practices that infringe on the rights of consumers."

Provided by SciDev.Net

Citation: COVID-19 compels new food safety norms in Asia (2020, June 12) retrieved 10 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2020-06-covid-compels-food-safety-norms.html>

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