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Participatory Risk Assessment: A New Tool for Improving Smallholder Market Access and Consumer Health

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Abstract

Rapid urbanisation, globalisation and intensification of livestock production in developing countries are causing dramatic changes in food production, supply and consumption with the potential of generating unprecedented opportunities for poor farmers, processors and traders.

Most poor people buy and sell in informal markets which have escaped safety and quality regulation. Studies on livestock products in these markets typically find high levels of pathogens and other hazards such as toxins or drug residues. These not only impose a heavy burden of avoidable sickness and death, but constrain producer access to higher value markets where standards prevail.

Managing food safety in informal markets is challenging: regulation by definition has failed, while lack of knowledge and lack of resources constrain the ability of producers, traders and consumers to self-initiate better food safety. Risk-based approaches that focus on the harm caused by hazards and use a pathway approach in order to identify the best means of preventing harm are likely to be more effective at ensuring food safety than traditional methods relying on inspection and punishment.

This paper reviews risk-based approaches for better management of food-borne diseases in developing countries, with an emphasis on local markets and emerging diseases. Methodologies developed by the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) are reviewed. The benefits of risk-based approaches as well as the challenges of adapting them are discussed: we argue that the limited application is partly due to lack of expertise and partly due to difficulties in applying risk assessment to diverse, non-linear, shifting, and data-scarce systems in which formal and informal (or traditional) food supply systems co-exist and overlap; views of various stakeholders on food safety objectives diverge; there is low willingness or ability to pay among consumers for improved food quality, and low enforcement capacity.

Using examples from ongoing case-studies involving emerging food borne diseases in East Africa, we suggest that incorporating participatory methodologies can meet the need for adapted risk analysis appropriate to the developing country context.

Keywords: Food security, participatory methodologies, risk assessment