



1.17 Develop a new global food safety index

The Solution: In order to motivate and measure progress in improving food safety, a Global Food Safety Index (GFSI) is proposed. It will be validated, improved, and developed into a standalone index to be updated annually and managed by an International Global Organisation (IGO) or consortium of IGOs.

Source of the Solution: The idea came from the food safety working group.

Problem addressed within food systems: Most risky food is sold in the informal systems (i.e., small-scale, traditional processing and retail that escapes comprehensive and effective food safety assurance) of LMICs, yet these have been largely ignored by the public sector, civil society, and donors. A global index that covers the informal sector will provide information on the status quo, help benchmarking, act as a baseline, help resource allocation, and measure and motivate progress. Global indices exist for most areas of development concern including health, gender equity, ease of doing business, but none for food safety. However, several global initiatives collect some information on food safety outcomes, performance, and process from most countries on a regular basis. These include: The WHO International Health Regulations (WHO IHR); the World Animal Health Organisation Performance of Veterinary Services Pathway (OIE PVS); the Institute of Health Metrics and Evaluation (IHME); the African Union African Food Safety Index (AFSI). These tend to focus on the formal sector, but many contain data relevant to the informal sector. In addition, many high-income countries collect information on foodborne disease and food safety.

How this solution will address that problem: People have a strong preference to eat safe, unadulterated food; when they have credible information that food is unsafe, they cease to buy and consume it. Informal food systems often sell traditional, minimally processed, locally produced food. The challenge in informal markets is that both public and private sectors lack the ability to assure the safety of foods. Moreover, there is no culture of food safety and lack of trust in public and private sectors. For this to change, multiple integrated interventions are needed.

One of these would be the GFSI, as what cannot be measured will not be managed. Development of a food safety index that, for the first time, covers LMICs and provides a framework to track outcome and process indicators will help identify and prioritise areas of intervention that are likely to maximise outcomes for member states. For example, one indicator in the index might be the rate of food safety tests per product; this would help evaluate if an appropriate number of tests are being done on appropriate products, to shift food inspection activities. It would also serve a baseline against which progress could be measured and a benchmark that countries could use to compare themselves with others, motivating a spirit of competition and improvement. It might also be a target in the SDGs, which currently have very poor coverage of food safety.

The index will measure processes and outcomes in a granular way that focuses on specific areas that can be implemented directly. Several sources of information on food safety exist but these are fragmented because of the siloed nature of institutional operation and because the importance of food safety has only recently been realised. By compiling information from these, a prototype index could be developed rapidly and at low cost. An algorithm and computer programme would be developed to integrate, synthesise, and present the information. This would be an imperfect index, as it would miss several important indicators, especially those related to the informal sector, but some information is better than none; if successful, this could be followed by a second phase of development in which additional indicators are added and collected.



Annual reports would be released on indicators relevant to food safety; over time, we would expect these to lead to more rational and risk-based resource allocation by food safety funders, greater investment in food safety in the informal sector, and improvements in food safety indicators over time. The final impact would be global reduction in sickness and death from foodborne disease (which has a health burden equivalent to malaria, HIV/AIDS, or tuberculosis).

Solution’s alignment to the ‘game changing and systemic solution’ criteria:

Impact potential at scale: The GFSI will be global covering every country currently reporting to WHO, OIE, African Union, EFSA and gathering data from IHME and, as it becomes active, the Global Burden of Animal Diseases. Informal food systems have been neglected and so represent ‘low-hanging fruit’ where quick progress may be anticipated.

Actionability: The GFSI will be developed in two stages. The first is to gather information on food safety already being collected by the aforesaid agencies and to develop algorithms and models that allow information to be integrated and synthesised. This will require buy-in from the aforesaid agencies, but there is already considerable interest in food safety as well in improving co-ordination, as witnessed by the IHR-PVS bridging workshops. The second stage would be filling the gaps and developing a more comprehensive index.

Sustainability: In its simplest form, the GFSI is an amalgamation of existing data and could be maintained by one or more of the agencies involved at minimal cost. A stand-alone index would be more expensive, but many other indices have proven useful and long lived.

Existing evidence: Global or widely used indices such as the human development index, Transparency International index, and Programme for International Student Assessment have been very effective in helping supra-national strategy and planning and in motivating change at national level. According to Kelly and Simmons (2019)¹, the massive growth in global indices reflects their success in leveraging politicians’ and bureaucrats’ reputational concerns by framing, establishing ‘standards,’ and repeatedly engendering public comparisons. They can be deployed to stimulate state competition and shape policy agendas, that is, as ‘technologies of power’.² The nascent AFSI is already demonstrating the feasibility and utility of a food safety index for the continent of Africa.

Current/likely political support: Several countries are interested in improving food safety in the informal sector. There are currently major initiatives in Ethiopia, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Vietnam, Cambodia, and India. This idea will rely on buy-in from WHO, OIE, IHME and AFSI. We have senior members from WHO, OIE, FAO, EC on the working group’s Expert Advisory Committee and think they would be interested in improving understanding and management of food safety. At least one IGO has already expressed interest. However, there are inevitable tensions between the formal food safety system and the informal food safety system, which will need to be managed.

Contexts for which this is well suited: Although the index will be global, we suggest dissemination and promotion should prioritise LMICs, particularly those with transitioning economies, high or increasing urbanisation, more literate consumers with high concerns over food safety, and evidence of a high burden of foodborne disease. Many countries meet these criteria.

¹ Kelly JG, Simmons BA, 2019. Introduction: The Power of Global Performance Indicators. *International Organization*, 73, 3, 491 – 510.

² Hansen, Hans Krause. 2012. The Power of Performance Indices in the Global Politics of Anti-Corruption. *Journal of International Relations and Development* 15 (4):506–31