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# Food safety needs a collaborative approach

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With better understanding of nutritional qualities of food and their health implications, consumers increasingly are rejecting inferior quality and unsafe foods. Photo: Mint

Our country, though agriculturally abundant, is still struggling to provide its large population with the right nutrition. In a few decades, as we continue to grow in numbers and economically, the situation can turn more challenging — if not alarming — if we don't come up with innovative food safety and security solutions now.

A growing economy, higher incomes, rapid urbanization and rising consumer awareness are influencing the Indian palate like never before. While the average Indian consumer is increasingly demanding more variety in food choices and healthier alternatives, she is also equally concerned about where the food is coming from, its quality and safety.

## Harmonize food standards globally

With increasing globalization of food, it is imperative to aid free movement from areas of surplus to areas of deficit. However, when it comes to food, there are several safety standards that each country follows and, in an ideal case, these should be a standardized set of science-based parameters that are common across geographies. In reality, however, we are far from such a unified state of affairs. Conflicting food standards and testing procedures make it extremely cumbersome to trade in commodities and food across countries.

The Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) supports the global food safety standards based on the Codex Alimentarius Commission, initiated by the World Health Organization (WHO) along with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). In India, the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has harmonized standards for many food additives, in line with the Codex standards. Also, work is underway to implement these in other food categories. While we are adopting global standards where relevant, it is important to keep in mind the local, cultural and geographical origin of the food items while adopting or setting the standards. The objective of nutritious and safe food is common to all countries across the globe and, hence, as far as possible, we should have common parameters to ensure this. Harmonizing Indian food standards with global standards is critical to achieve this.

## Monitor more efficiently

FSSAI, the apex food regulatory body, establishes food safety standards at a national level and implementation, including administration, licensing, and compliance, is a state subject. After some initial teething problems, FSSAI has come into its own and is actively working towards ensuring food safety for all through various initiatives, including citizen guidance and capacity building under the Safe and Nutritious Food (SNF) programme. With the regulator and states working in tandem, we will be able to deliver food safety seamlessly across internal borders.

It is imperative to add more certified food labs with access to better equipment/ technology and better testing capabilities to check compliance. Implementing authorities on the ground need to be regularly trained to enhance their knowledge and experience required to administer these laws. To speed up capability building at the implementation level, support can also be sought from global food safety organizations, a step that has been taken by some other emerging economies.

## Responsible approach to food labelling

With better understanding of nutritional qualities of food and their health implications, consumers increasingly are rejecting inferior quality and unsafe foods. The discerning Indian consumer does not just want to know if his food is safe, but also details about the ingredients, certifications, energy content, nutritional benefits, and food additives. In light of this, it is important to educate consumers about the food they are consuming and its nutritional properties, so that they can make informed choices. As we move towards a more evolved food pattern and while it is ideal to reduce consumption of high fats, sugar and salt to promote healthy eating habits, we must not forget that India faces the unique double burden of malnutrition. On one hand, there is a growing urban population that is facing overnutrition challenges; at the other end of the spectrum, we still have a majority of the population that continues its daily battle with undernutrition.

Overall, what everyone needs is good quality food that provides better nutrition. Standards of nutrition also need to be viewed in the context of average Indian diets, which are still largely prepared at home and deficient in some essential micro nutrients. Hence, care needs to be exercised to ensure consumer education and labelling requirements done with the objective of consumer awareness do not cause consumer scare.