

Food safety and security must become everyone's business in India

Saturday, 06 June, 2020

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This year's focus will be on prevention, detection, and management of food-borne risks. Considering the current global pandemic situation, this year's theme draws attention to the need for food safety and security in the agriculture and food and beverage value chains.

India is traditionally an agrarian economy. However, its contribution to the nation's GDP is still below that of the industrial and services sectors, despite various measures and governmental policies. While it is heartening to note that the contribution to GDP is higher than the global average, India still lags behind China.

The Ministry of Agriculture has strategies in place to boost the agriculture sector's contribution to the nation's GDP and is striving to implement food safety protocols to ensure food security for all.

While there has been some progress, closer inspection indicates that programmes and policies and protocols are too focussed on specific parts of the value chain. Considering the size of the value chain, it will take time before tangible results are obtained.

However, it should be noted that, often, the implementation at grassroots levels is dependent on too many stakeholders and its execution is not always streamlined. This gives rise to delays in the translation of benefits.

The FSSAI (Food Safety and Standards Authority of India) as a nodal agency is doing extensive work in revising and strengthening the food safety laws and regulations. The food safety authority has created various schemes to curtail and prevent food adulteration, which is still an on-going battle in the Indian agriculture sector.

Its efforts to ensure clean labelling of food products, revamp packaging guidelines and launch the Food Safety and Compliance System (FoSCoS) in June 2020, as a one-stop point for regulatory and compliance engagements with food business operators (FBOs) are noteworthy.

However, organisations such as the Central Food Technological Research Institute (CFTRI), National Institute of Nutrition (NIN), and others, emphasise the need for better regulations on excess fat and sugar, especially in packaged and ready-to-eat foods.

The use of pesticides, antibiotics, and other chemicals in food needs to be addressed and regulated as it directly impacts the health of the nation. Careful consideration of the myriad approaches, schemes, policies, regulations, and protocols gives the impression that the “Farm-to-Fork” concept is still not a reality.

Considering the size and volume of the agriculture and food and beverage sector operations, it can be argued that the concept cannot be realised in the next few years. However, it is vital to consider the entire value chain network (from agricultural inputs until products reach the end- consumer) as a single entity to help in realising food safety and security.

Despite claims of infrastructure availability, a surplus of storage facilities and so on, the reality depicts a contradictory picture. A report from FSSAI late last year found that many states lack the infrastructural facilities to ensure food safety protocols.

It specified that many states lack facilities for testing food samples on time. Similarly, cold chain facilities still need to be streamlined as lack of the same has been attributed to food spoilage and product wastage. Current approaches are often aimed at specific segments of the value chain network. They must be streamlined to implement a unified goal of self-sufficiency and food security across the nation.

Awareness and accessibility of available technologies and services that can boost productivity, access to storage facilities, infrastructure development, and linkages across the nation to ensure seamless transportation of goods and produce can reduce food wastage, avoid delays and meet consumer demands across the nation.

Integrated approaches toward continuous monitoring of productivity and yield across agriculture, streamlining availability for exports, internal consumption, and food and beverage and fast moving consumer goods sector fields to potentially reduce barriers between various segments can help India realise its goal of self-sufficiency while ensuring food safety and security for all.