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**A food authority**

State regulatory mechanisms in Pakistan currently extend to a range of critical commodities and services, such as drugs, electricity, oil, gas, telecommunications, media, aviation, money and chemicals, which are governed by independent federal regulatory authorities. These regulatory authorities address the need for equity in quality and pricing and balance public and private interests by employing a range of economic and administrative measures.

At present, the government of Pakistan does not have a regulatory authority for food control. The cost to the state for not having a regulatory authority for food control is high and includes increased health costs and reduced economic productivity due to food induced illness, reduced international trade and losses in foreign earnings, increased political volatility because of food quality, availability and price and reduced growth and innovation in the food and agriculture sector and reduced earnings.

The subject of food control is scattered in the federal government’s ministries of food, science, health and industry. Recently, provincial food authorities have emerged as important players in their respective jurisdictions. The agriculture, livestock, food and industry departments of provincial governments also enforce some regulations.

The current situation suggests that Pakistan does not have an overarching regulatory framework but a set of laws dating from 1937. These laws and their rules and regulations provide multiple ministries and agencies at the federal and provincial levels the authority to exercise sectoral controls over food from production to consumption. However, the controls are mostly end-product based and reactive.

Modern food control demands a farm to fork approach with practices and standards being implemented in a preventive way all through the steps – from production to retail to the consumer including the consumption of the final food product. Moreover, the current fragmented setup is not equipped to deal with the complex set of emerging challenges for food safety posed by climate change, gene modification, irradiation, pollution of natural resources and anti-microbial resistance apart from known physical, chemical and microbiological contaminants.

To overcome these challenges and meet its aspiration to become an upper middle-income country which in turn will need significant growth in agriculture and food exports, an institutional response is needed.

Food control plays an important role in ensuring a high quality, safe and nutritious food supply for the public, for their good health and for economic benefits. It is based on the food chain approach – the recognition that the responsibility for the supply of food that is safe, healthy and nutritious is shared along the entire food chain by all involved with the production, processing, trade and consumption of food. This requires a national food control system that ensures coordination and a clear delineation of roles and responsibilities among the three principal stakeholders – government, private sector and consumers.

As such, food control systems protect the health and safety of consumers and help assure the safety and quality of foods being traded both nationally and internationally. Most countries of the world have established a national regulatory authority that oversees national food control systems. While there is no ‘one size fits all approach’ to a national food regulatory authority, Pakistan could learn a lot from similar authorities of its trading partners, the US, India, UK, Australia, Canada, China, EU and Saudi Arabia.

Food standards of the FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius (Codex) were declared as the international benchmark for the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. They are managed by a commission comprising 187 member states, including Pakistan. Codex provides a neutral forum for member countries to voluntarily participate and contribute to the formulation of internationally accepted food standards.

The participating countries benefit from having agreed common standards which they can use to enhance mutual and regional trade in food commodities and promote economic growth. Codex also provides member states with standards that can form the basis of new norms or be adopted directly as standards at the national level.

To ensure the population’s access to safe and nutritious food at affordable prices in Pakistan’s common food market and to remove barriers to growth in domestic and international food trade, Pakistan should consider the establishment of an independent federal food regulatory authority, the Pakistan Food Authority (PFA).

The PFA would have the responsibility for national food control systems (legislation, standards, policy and pricing), while the implementation and enforcement of the food control systems would remain the responsibility of existing federal and provincial institutions. The PFA would have a more pronounced mandate for the prevention of food safety problems rather than being only reactive.

The PFA will: coordinate all the national sector-specific and provincial authorities and support them to implement food safety measures. And have the responsibility to develop science-based regulations. It will also include scientific and technical committees to provide data and deliberate on food safety hazards and risks. It will ensure that food safety measures and standards and risk-based inspection procedures implemented at the provincial level are harmonized and in line with Codex and international best practices.

The Authority will also focus on capacity building to strengthen implementation in the provinces and developing a strong food safety culture in partnership with the private sector and consumer groups. And monitor and analyze the market situation and provide updated information on supply, demand and pricing of food.

Keeping food safe is a complex process that starts on the farm and ends with the consumer. High quality food control systems require the translation of global best practice to the national level. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) stands ready to technically advise the government of Pakistan on the development of a regulatory framework for food control, in line with global best practice.

The writer is the FAO representative in Pakistan.