

FOOD SAFETY IN AFRICA: RETHINKING THE DESIGN OF LAWS AND REGULATIONS TO ENHANCE THEIR EFFECTIVENESS

Nutrition Research Facility – February 2026

Food safety remains a significant public health concern in Africa, which experiences the highest burden of foodborne diseases globally. In 2010, the continent reported 1,200 disability-adjusted life years (DALYs)¹ lost per 100,000 people, compared to 35 to 50 in North America and Europe, and 700 in Southeast Asia². Ensuring food safety is also crucial for good nutrition, helping to break the cycle of foodborne illness and malnutrition.

To safeguard public health, many countries have established regulatory frameworks, setting mandatory food safety standards. Although laws and regulations have generally been effective in high-income countries, the ongoing prevalence of foodborne diseases in African nations raises questions regarding their effectiveness and impact in these settings.

As part of the European Commission's "Knowledge and Research for Nutrition" initiative, the Nutrition Research Facility (NRF) undertook a [study](#) to evaluate the effectiveness of laws and regulations designed to improve food safety and food quality across Africa. The study centred on nutritionally valuable products that may pose health risks due to contamination: fresh fruit and vegetables and processed fish in Côte d'Ivoire, and milk in Kenya.

The NRF used a methodology that combines three main strands:

1. An analysis of regulatory frameworks, drawing on a literature review and interviews with key informants, which helped to map the main stakeholders involved in these frameworks in Côte d'Ivoire and Kenya.
2. An evaluation of microbiological and chemical contamination, including an analysis of 540 samples from markets in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, alongside a systematic literature review for Kenya.
3. A qualitative assessment based on interviews, workshops and focus group discussions with policymakers, researchers, private sector representatives and consumers.

Key messages

1. Current food safety laws and regulations are not effective enough, as evidenced by the persistent chemical and microbiological contamination found in key products, such as fresh fruit and vegetables and processed fish in Côte d'Ivoire, and milk in Kenya, which frequently exceeds maximum statutory limits.
2. While limited administrative capacity to enforce such laws and regulations is one obstacle, further challenges include the difficulties informal sector operators face in complying with standards that are often perceived as unsuitable or unachievable.
3. Therefore, only strengthening the enforcement of food safety laws and regulations is not sufficient to improve their effectiveness. It is equally crucial to reconsider how these laws and regulations are formulated, ensuring they are more inclusive and reflective of the realities faced by informal sector operators. Furthermore, additional public policy instruments should be employed to support and encourage operators to improve their practices.



¹ A disability-adjusted life year (DALY) equates to the loss of one year of healthy life. DALYs represent the sum of years of life lost due to premature death and years of healthy life lost owing to disability or illness, compared to the expected life expectancy

² <https://www.foodbornediseaseburden.org/ferg/estimates>

Current laws and regulations alone are insufficient to guarantee food safety

The study found that both countries have a well-defined institutional framework and a set of regulations outlining the required safety standards. Nevertheless, chemical and microbiological analyses, as well as literature reviews, show that certain contaminants regularly exceed statutory limits. For instance, 73% and 78% of smoked sardine samples contained *Escherichia coli* and pesticide (deltamethrin) levels above the microbiological criteria and maximum residue limit established by Ivorian regulations. In Kenya, a study reported that 63% of milk samples exceeded the aflatoxin threshold recommended by European standards. The degree of health risk to consumers depends on the frequency and the quantities of the contaminated foods consumed.

Such contamination mainly stems from misuse of plant protection products, failure to observe good production practices, and poor hygiene throughout the food chain. The ability to manage safety risks and comply with standards varies depending on the target market (export or domestic), the profile of the actors involved (formal or informal), and their organisational arrangements (integrated sectors or cooperatives versus individuals).

Various obstacles limit the effective implementation of existing laws and regulations

The study identifies several major challenges in food safety governance restricting the effectiveness of current laws and regulations:

- Limited capacity among the competent authorities to enforce laws and regulations effectively.
- Institutional competition issues, which hinder coordination between the competent authorities.
- Existing laws and regulations are generally unsuitable for the capacities of actors in the informal sector, reflecting their lack of inclusion in the development of these frameworks.
- In Côte d'Ivoire, there is a lack of mandatory criteria for fresh fruit and vegetables intended for local consumption.

Recommendations

A new approach is required, with a focus on both the informal sector and the internal market, including:

1. Re-evaluating the process for setting food safety laws and regulations by adopting strategies that are:
 - inclusive, engaging stakeholders from the informal sector, and establishing standards designed for gradual improvement in their practices;
 - based on thorough health risk assessments that consider consumption patterns and quantities, to set appropriate thresholds for standards and avoid unnecessary over-regulation.
2. Expanding beyond laws and regulations to leverage additional public policy instruments, such as:
 - improving infrastructure at food processing sites and markets;
 - facilitating access to finance for small operators so they can implement appropriate technologies (for example, smokehouses for fish or innovative containers for milk);
 - introducing incentive mechanisms based on quality criteria that reward the efforts of stakeholders (such as quality labels, bonuses, or subsidies).
3. Fostering a culture of food safety by:
 - developing training programmes tailored to local contexts, especially for those in the informal sector, to help adoption of existing standards;
 - organising awareness campaigns about safety risks;
 - improving higher education programmes;
 - supporting the organisation and representation of informal sector actors;
 - strengthening consumer associations.

For further information:

<https://www.nutrition-research-facility-studies.eu/laws-and-regulations-food-safety>

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