

Regional Agribusiness Initiatives in the Middle East and Northern Africa

Food safety has an impact on national economy and public health. The food industry makes up most of the factories in Lebanon (18.2%), involves 25% of total workforce, and produces the number one export (food) in Lebanon. It is a 1.7 billion \$ industry and despite the worsening economy and political turmoil, food exports from Lebanon have been on the rise with a 55% increase since 2009 (Bissat, 2014). Despite the importance of the food sector to the Lebanese economy and industry, food safety is still a major issue. Food safety in Lebanon is governed by a series of outdated decrees. Yet there still is no food safety law in Lebanon.

After 25 years of working in the Lebanese food industry which; as a Food Scientist; allowed me to realize the market access challenges in more than 65 countries that we used to export to. It is important to serve the industry by addressing their countries food safety regulatory agencies and rules. In addressing food security in developing nations, we lobby the private sector to focus on consumers and development basics. As a food scientist, I think it is important to tackle the market access by establishing and verifying procedures and practices that ensure quality, safety and security issues at par with World Trade Organization (WTO) and CODEX requirements.

When COVID-19 pandemic hit the world, my responsibility as a scientist who is dedicated to serving protection and safety peaked and we had to take it as a mission. Even though that there is currently no evidence that the virus that causes COVID-19 spreads to people through food. However, it is important to safely handle and continue to cook foods to their recommended cooking temperatures to prevent foodborne illness. In a country like Lebanon, it is already hard enough to control food safety practices. Despite the presence of nine food related agencies, they have overlapping functions and poor coordination, lack of accountability, no existing food laws, no scheduled inspection programs, and poor control of microbiological and chemical hazards and food additives. These practices do not conform to international standards as there are too many public institutions involved making their work ineffective. We still however, take it as a mission to increase know-how on food safety practices through conducting training sessions with municipalities and chambers of commerce, spread awareness on the importance of food safety through specific associations, empowering women to develop their food products according to the correct standards, and abiding by international specifications when helping producers develop new products.

Al- Wafic groups scientists and private sector stakeholders that are trying to harmonize SME initiatives that can address global reforms in Agri/Agro Business and all related issues. Again gender issues are of importance; however, platforms need to be developed. Al Wafic as it holds a group of scientists, has partnered with NGO's such as UNDP, and with associations such as Frederich Naumann Foundation, to undergo projects that aim to improve the agribusiness within the region.

What we can learn and recommend is that food safety should not be affected by certain circumstances, it should be applied routinely and there should be constant awareness on the importance of protecting consumers from foodborne illnesses. This means that our mission to strive and spread the notion of food safety will always be ongoing regardless of any obstacles we face.

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