Annex 1: WORKSHOP OF THE SCIENTIFIC COMMITTEE OF THE FASFC

Afternoon session: 27 november 2009

Summary of the remarks/suggestions.

QUESTION 1 - ROOM 1 and 2

1.a. What is the impression on the current state of food safety compared to 10 years ago? (Based on what arguments / indicators)?

- The majority of participants found that food safety is improved.
- This matter is difficult to assess objectively by the general public. It is rather perception. The public mainly focuses on the 'known hazards' (e.g. dioxins). Next year, a consumer survey will be organized by the FASFC, which will enable to obtain a better picture of consumers' opinion on food safety.
- It can be objectively shown that food safety improves: there are fewer non-compliant analysis for chemical and microbiological hazards, there is a reduced number of food toxi-infections.
- The consumers perception might also be that food safety in the past 10 years has improved.

Arguments:

- The public is more aware of the problem.
- Companies note that over the last 10 years, there was first an increase in complaints (due to a higher awareness about food safety), while the last 2 or 3 years there was a decline (due to an improved food safety) .
- Significant reforms at European and national level have taken place (e.g. EC Regulation 178/2002; establishment of the EFSA, introduction of self-checking, establishment of the FASFC). These reforms have led to an improved organization of the authorities, to more efficient controls of the food chain, to a better follow-up (faster reaction) of the controls. At the same time detection tests improved and better analysis tools became available.
- The FASFC became more visible for the consumer through the authorizations which have to be hang out by the operator. This reassures the consumer.
- The FASFC communicates better on risks related to certain foodstuffs (for example: recalls, best hygiene practices,…).
- However, consumers seem more interested in the nutritional value of food and less in the food safety aspects.

1.b. What are the expectations towards the future evolution of food safety? (Based on which arguments/indicators)?

- Sector organisations project, on one hand, a further improvement of food safety resulting from a further implementation of self-checking. On the other hand, food safety is also under pressure: economic pressure (e.g. price), pressure from the distribution/consumer (e.g. mild preservation of food). This may lead to the occurrence of new risks.

- Will there be a status quo of food safety in the future? On one hand prevention techniques improve and scientific knowledge increases (e.g. vaccination and control of *Salmonella sp*.). On the other hand, analytical methods become more efficient enabling to detect more contaminants in more matrices.

- Current trend: it is observed through monitoring that the results of product analysis are good, but that the implementation and validation of self-checking grows less quickly than expected.

- Two major tasks are expected from the FASFC: to reduce the exposure of consumers to potential hazards as much as possible and to keep the economic and social impact of new incidents as low as possible.

QUESTION 2 – ROOM 1 and 2

Are the generic activities of the Agency namely (1) risk assessment and risk management, (2) development of self-checking, (3) controls, (4) activities of the laboratories, (5) (risk) communication, (6) crisis prevention and crisis management, (7) international trade and relations and (8) (possibly) public health (outbreaks of food-borne illness)) suitable to be included in the barometer of food safety? Is there a direct or indirect relationship between the generic activities and food safety?

- It is better to speak about the generic activities in general in the control of food safety instead of the generic activities of the Agency, since there are also other organizations / institutions which have an impact on food safety. The participants agree that the above eight generic activities have to be taken into account when designing the barometer. The existence of a direct or indirect relationship to food safety is confirmed. Too much focus is put on 'response' and 'state' and too little attention is paid on 'pressure'.

- As an additional generic activity, control of self-checking, should be added. It is executed in different sectors of the food chain. Note: the indicator is already on the list.

- Is a hierarchical classification desirable? Is a weighing of the indicators indicated?

- The activities of the information service should be included in the generic activity ‘risk communication’.

- In the early stage and before any exercise is performed aimed at determining the indicators, it is of upmost importance that the critical determinants of food safety are identified.

- Greater attention should be paid to the interaction between ‘risk evaluation and risk management’, on one hand, and ‘controls’ on the other hand. The results of the controls should be used in a better way for performing risk assessment (e.g. establishment of new standards).

- The data from operators (e.g. in regard to self-checking) can be used as additional data. Also other databases should be considered, such as those from consumer protection organizations. If data from outside the Agency are used, the risk for introducing systematic errors is great because the data originate from samples taken with another purpose than the samples taken by the Agency (risk based approach).

- The normative activities should also be taken into account in one way or another. The example was given that if standards are tightened, more non-conformities will be detected, but that in itself, food safety has improved.

QUESTION 3 – ROOM 1

What is your opinion on the following indicators?

3.1. Risk evaluation and risk management

3.1.1. Number of different hazards yearly programmed in the control program.

- Attention has to be paid to the situation in which the number of parameters increases while the budget remains the same, resulting in less resources available to control important hazards.
- Indicators have to be selected for which important trends can be demonstrated.
- Enough attention should be paid to define the nature of the hazard (e.g. pesticides versus active substances).

3.1.2. Pro-active risk evaluation: research activities financed by the federal authorities (total yearly budget) in regard to food safety and sanitary policy of animal and plant health.

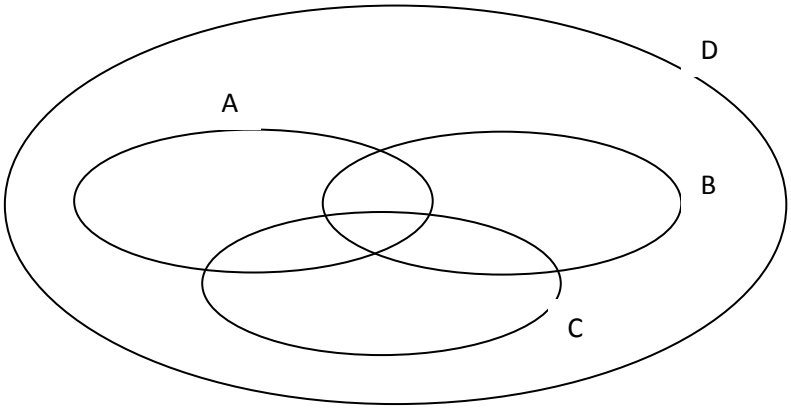
- This indicator is not considered to be a good indicator because of its upstream position and because the budget is too small.
- If only the federal level is considered, only a part of the total research budget is taken into account.

3.2. Self-checking

3.2.1. Number of validated self-checking guides (and updates) per year.

- This indicator only provides information on the availability of self-checking in the companies (step 1). The implementation (step 2) and validation (step 3) are also important.
- The implementation can be measured by means of the inspections, while the certification and validation can be determined through FASFC audits.
- Different factors may play a role in the food safety barometer. Not al factors are equally important and weighing seems necessary.

  Factor 1 : initiatives taken by companies



  D : all companies in the food chain

  A : group of companies in the food chain which have a self-checking guide

  B : group of companies in the food chain applying self-checking procedures

  C : group of companies in the food chain using a validated self-checking system

  Depending on the position of the company (relatively spoken) a value is attributed (not all the above-mentioned elements contribute equally to the food safety in the food chain).

  A-B-C = value 1

  B-C = value 3

  C = value 5

  (The principle is that companies, belonging to more groups, obtain the highest value).

- Eventually the ‘participation in a sampling plan’ can be added and can be attributed a certain value.

Factor 2 : observations at the companies

For instance, number of notifications, number of recalls, number of food toxi-infections,… However, as mentioned above, working with a relative number is preferable (% compared to the total number of operators). This seems not so obvious (some examples: % versus number of affected batches, % versus number of units sold, % versus number of batches sold by the sector, …). But these suggestions can potentially lead to new ideas.

Other factors can also be added.

3.2.2. Number of sector sampling plans validated by the Agency per year.

- Companies are not obliged to participate in sector sampling plans.
- Only a restricted number of sampling plans are available, but many companies perform analyses on company level and do not participate in sampling plans at sector level.
- Available sector plans are aimed at analysis of raw materials.

3.3. Crisisprevention and crisismanagement

3.3.1. Number of RASFF notifications by FASFC on products on the Belgian market per year.

- There was a lot of discussion on the suitability of this indicator.
- Truly RASFF notifications as well as wrongly notifications exist.
- Has this to be restricted to products on the Belgian market?
- Attention has to be paid not to overlap with results of the control program.
- The number of RASFF notifications is not a good indicator. An alternative may be the RASFF notifications related to specific contaminants.

3.3.2. Impact of previous crises / incidents on foodstuffs in Belgium: number of tons food stuffs under embargo per year due to crises or incidents.

- Often products which do not cause concern are blocked.
- There is not a good definition for crisis. The number of crises is consequently not a good indicator.
- Crises are important and it is recommended to have a good indicator for crises.
- Products which are under embargo do not contribute to exposure, and therefore are not a food safety problem.
- Recalled products have contributed to public exposure and are indeed a food safety issue. The number of recalls can be considered proportionally to the number of incidents. How to measure the number of recalls? The indicator ‘recall’ has to be further elaborated. The indicator ‘recall’ can be very relevant provided that the circumstances which led to a recall are objectified, transparant and realistic.

3.4. Public health

3.4.1. Number of notified cases of food borne zoonotic hazards.

- Good data are available for pathogens for which a refund is foreseen by the authorities, but not for the other pathogens (= bias).
- In regard to chemical hazards more indicators have to be in direct relationship with food safety. For instance: dioxine concentration in breast milk. If such indicators are ample available then it is interesting to invest in them. It has to be accounted for that exposure not only occurs through food. A useful source for information are the bio-monitoring programs which are executed in the “hot spots” in Vlaanderen. These zones are known for their greater degree of general pollution (air, bottom) such as the Genk region. On the website: http://www.milieu-en-gezondheid.be/ further interesting information can be found under “resultaten” and “rapporten” .

3.4.2. Number of notified complaints in regard to food safety per year via the consumer hot line (excluding the complaints on food quality and excluding the complaints on the smoking ban).

A distinction has to be made between well-founded and ill-founded complaints.

- A better acquaintance of the notification point (e.g. via radio publicity) will lead to a greater number of complaints (= bias).
- This is not a good indicator.

QUESTION 4 – ROOM 2

What is your opinion in regard to the following indicators?

4.1. Control

4.1.1. Control in primary production (and commerce in animals/plants) and in the supplier chain: % of conformity in samples controlled for zoonotic hazards.

- The percentage of non-conformities depends on the indicator: e.g. melamine, dioxines…
- In the framework of risk evaluation, it would be better to take the degree of importance of non-conformities in regard to food safety into account.
- The indicator should be weighted in function of the consumption volume and the consumption frequency of the food stuff.
- To have an idea of the state of the food safety in Belgium, it would be preferable to take the mean values into account instead of the exceptions, being the non-conformities.
- Is the indicator related to the food chain or to the end product? Is the scope equal to the safety of the food chain or to food safety ?
- FASFC data have to be interpreted carefully. By increasing performance of a risk based control program (FASFC) to identify risk populations, the chance to detect non-conformities will become greater. Such a result may distort the image of mean conformity of the total population.

4.1.2. Control of the entire food chain: number of samples to be controlled on chemical (man-made) hazards (environmental contaminants, process contaminants, residues).

- The number of examined samples by itself does not seem to be relevant. Attention has to be paid to the hazard and to the examined matrix. It is highlighted that analyses mostly are done on foodstuffs at risk and therefore do not provide an at random image of the state. Weighing of indicators seems to be necessary.
- Would it be possible to work with ‘sentinel matrices’?

4.2. Laboratories

4.2.1. Percentage of analyses realized within the provided delay per year.

- The participants are finally in favor for this indicator because it allows to measure the responsiveness of the laboratories (duration for the analysis as short as possible and respecting the predetermined terms).
- Quickly providing laboratory results enables the authority to take measures promptly preventing contaminated foodstuffs to reach the consumer.
- It is also a performance indicator for the laboratory.
- Is responsiveness of the laboratories a good parameter for food safety?
- As performance and scope (number of parameters per matrix or number of matrices which can be analyzed per parameter) increases, the possibility will increase to do more analyses which should finally result in a better food safety.

4.2.2. Number of inter-laboratory tests per year.

- The participants are of the opinion that this is not a good indicator and prefer to use an indicator which allows to investigate the percentage of the analyses which are part of the inter laboratory tests.

- 4.3. International trade and relations

4.3.1. Control on imported harmful organisms: % conform phytosanitary controls on harmful organisms per year.

- The participants are of the opinion that the indicator is not very relevant because it relates only partially to imported foodstuffs.
- It is preferable to put those numbers into perspective by associating them with imported volumes.
- Not a food safety risk .

4.3.2. Networking: number of participations at international meetings by FASFC experts per year (EFSA, EU, Codex alimentarius, OIE, EPPO,…).

- Is participation of experts of FASFC a good indicator for food safety?
- The risk exists that this indicator will be abused by sending representatives to all kinds of meetings, even if they are not really relevant.

4.4. Risk communication

4.4.1. Press communications by the FASFC: number of press communications and media campaigns per year (excluding those related to recalls).

- Seems not to be relevant except if press communications and media campaigns are directly related to an increase or an emergence of a risk.
- This kind of an indicator is difficult to interpret: little communication may mean that the communication is bad, but may also mean that things are going well. It is questioned how the indicator should evolve in order to indicate an amelioration of the situation?

4.4.2. Consumer hotline: number of questions (not complaints) about food safety and food quality per year, except questions on smoking ban.

- An increase in the number of questions received by the consumer hotline can be the consequence of the fact that the consumers are better aware of the existence of the hotline.
- Very subjective and very subsidiary to temporary circumstances.

OTHER REMARKS

- In regard to chemical hazards, it is difficult to estimate the long term consequence for public health. Therefore, it is difficult to pronounce about the further evolution of food safety in relation to food chemical hazards.
- The number of destructions can be used as an indicator for animal and plant health. This indicator is difficult to interpret. An increase of the indicator may stand for a deterioration of the state in the field or, on the other hand, may signify that the authorities perform better.
- Non food transmittable zoönoses (e.g. MRSA) could be used as indicator for animal health.
- The number of dossiers treated by the scientific secretariat and the number of urgent advices given by the Scientific Committee are not suitable indicators because it is only the first time that a problem occurs that a request for an opinion is formulated.
- The value of each indicator has to be examined individually.
- At first the factors have to be determined which are critical for food safety and afterwards indicators have to be identified.
- The purpose of the barometer should be to measure trends.
- By whom and how will the results of the barometer be communicated? How will communication be on hazards which are not measured and of which no data exist?
- Will the barometer only treat food safety or also animal and plant health?
- The quality and the nature of the data used for the indicators are essential to determine the state of food safety. For instance, there is no relationship between the percentage of non conformities in regard to prescriptions on hygiene, infrastructure and food safety. Another example: in regard to contamination of poultry meat preparations, the FASFC data indicate a prevalence of maximum 20 to 30%, while the results of an independent study based on a representative sampling plan and a validated and standard protocol indicates a prevalence of about 50% (results of 2008).
- The determination of indicators results from a mixture of risk evaluation and risk management. The composition of the working group fails in one's duty to representatives of certain competent organizations.
- In regard to the pressure on food safety, it should be worthwhile to examine the indirect pressure, such as price, volume, origin of the import, volume and source of the products on the parallel market.
- Al indicators should point in the same direction (positive or negative).