FLAGSHIP 3 | Food Safety

Highlight 1: Workshop Identifies Strategies, Opportunities for Expanding Food Safety

In 2015, the World Health Organization’s Foodborne Disease Burden Epidemiology Reference Group released its most comprehensive estimates of the incidence, mortality, and disease burden from foodborne disease—and found it comparable to that of malaria, HIV/AIDS, or tuberculosis. Yet as Delia Grace, Program Leader in Animal and Human Health at the International Livestock Research (ILRI) and the A4NH Food Safety Flagship Leader, notes, “Food diseases don’t behave like other infectious diseases.” Most infectious diseases are most prevalent in areas where people are also poorest and basic infrastructure is lacking, yet foodborne diseases often increase as countries develop quickly, appetites grow for risky foods such as fresh produce and livestock products, and value chains become longer and more complex.

The workshop “Better Targeting Food Safety Investments in Low- and Middle-Income Countries,” hosted on May 24, 2017, by the CGIAR Research Program on Agriculture for Nutrition and Health (A4NH) and the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, together with the European Commission in Brussels, brought together policy makers, researchers, donors, and others to delve into the challenges impeding poor people’s access to safe foods throughout the world. Participants from different sectors noticed “dueling approaches” to food safety but agreed that solutions to food safety problems will require more than simply taking what has worked in high-income countries and replicating it. Moreover, some approaches could have unintended consequences for nutrition and livelihoods that make things worse for the poorest. New initiatives must involve considering what is appropriate to local food chains, weighing risk in given situations, and involving key actors who are able to build knowledge and capacity.

A4NH’s unique philosophy, which considers a demand, consumer-driven approach, creates a fresh launching point for developing solutions. From this vantage point, workshop attendees delved into conversations on why foodborne diseases matter for development, how to create an enabling environment, and the successes in and unintended consequences of small-scale food safety interventions. Several major themes emerged:

1. Collaboration and knowledge sharing among different sectors is critical and must be encouraged. Despite the many perspectives these sectors bring to the table, success in improving food safety depends on everyone working toward the common goal.

2. Consumers must weigh the risks when considering food choices, but they need more information to make better decisions. It is also important to distinguish between hazards and risks—a perceived hazard does not mean the actual risk is significant. This is particularly important when considering the role of informal markets, an integral part of many communities.

3. Lack of access to safe foods is a particularly acute problem for infants. Not only are they disproportionately affected by foodborne illnesses and deaths, but also they have the least control over their own exposure to this risk. Complicating the situation, the riskiest foods are also the most nutrient-dense and important for children as they grow, including fresh fruits and vegetables and animal protein.

Summarizing the workshop, A4NH Director John McDermott noted, “Progress in food safety will lead to progress in nutrition and health. Amid a lot of urgency, there is cause for optimism, but much work remains to be done.”