

Consideration for Centralised Food Safety Management in Zambia

Executive Summary

Food safety is a critical public health and economic concern in Zambia. While the country has made strides in establishing a legal and institutional framework to regulate food safety, the existing system faces several constraints that limit its effectiveness. This policy brief highlights the current legal and institutional landscape, the impact of foodborne illnesses, and the need for strengthening food safety governance through a centralised regulatory authority.

Zambia's food safety legal framework is anchored in key legislative instruments, including the Food Safety Act No. 7 of 2019, the Public Health Act, the Plant Pests and Diseases Act, and the Food and Nutrition Act No. 3 of 2020. These laws govern the safety, quality, and regulation of food production and distribution. They are enforced through several institutions that include the Food Safety Coordinating Committee (FSCC), and the National Food Laboratory, the National Food and Nutrition Commission (NFNC).

Despite these legal and institutional efforts, Zambia continues to experience significant foodborne disease outbreaks, including cholera, typhoid fever, and salmonellosis. Between 2010 and 2025, the country faced several cholera outbreaks, with the most severe occurring in 2023-2024, leading to over 20,000 cases and 690 deaths. These outbreaks impose a substantial economic burden on the healthcare system, reduce labour productivity, and disproportionately affect low-income communities.

Zambia's food safety governance is hindered by fragmented regulatory structures, limited enforcement capacity, weak coordination among institutions responsible for food safety, and insufficient public awareness and education on food safety risks.

This Policy Brief analyses the current food safety status in Zambia, with a focus on the legal and institutional frameworks, as well as the obstacles. It makes a case for the need to establish a centralised food safety regulatory authority to improve efficiency, accountability, and compliance with international food safety standards. In addition,

this paper advocates for urgently investing in capacity-building, research, and modern food testing technologies to improve consumer protection. It concludes with three specific recommendations on establishing a centralised food regulatory authority, strengthening the legal framework, and increasing investment in food safety infrastructure.

Introduction

Food is an essential element of human life providing energy, essential nutrients, and supporting the immune system. If not handled well, food can also be the source of serious illnesses that can threaten human life. The production and supply of quality food with minimal or no risk to human health is important for public health, economic stability, and sustainable development. Countries always take measures at different levels of society for ensuring that the food that is available to the public is of acceptable quality and meets key safety standards.



Further effort is made at bilateral and multilateral levels where countries strengthen their cooperation with other countries for better food safety. This includes setting and enforcing science-based international standards, which also facilitate the production and trade of safe food among countries.

The entire food production and supply chain needs to be subjected to stringent safety standards capable of delivering good quality food into the market. The basis for a good food safety system in a country is the presence of effective legal and institutional frameworks with the required critical minimum capacity. The primary purpose of these frameworks is to provide adequate protection of the public against risks associated with poor quality food.

Legal and Institutional Frameworks in Zambia

The legal framework for food safety in Zambia has wide coverage and contains provisions for regulating the manufacture, sale, and use of food products. The Food Safety Act No 7 of 2019, Public Health Act CAP 295, the Plant Pests and Disease Act, and the Food and Nutrition Act No 3 of 2020 are the key Acts of parliament that provide a legal framework for food safety in Zambia.

Legal frameworks can only be implemented within a specified institutional set up that practically translate the legal provisions into actions. Zambia has a clear institutional framework that has been established to facilitate the production, preparation, and delivery of safe food to the public. The institutional framework allocates specific responsibilities to the different institutions within the country. The overall responsibility of public health in Zambia falls under the Ministry of Health, which cooperates with other important institutions in the country to deliver this mandate. The major structures in the management of food health in Zambia are:



1. The Food Safety Coordinating Committee (FSCC) is responsible for coordinating the implementation of food safety policies, procedures, and guidelines;
2. The National Food Laboratory which is tasked with conducting analysis and tests to ensure food safety standards are met;

3. The National Food and Nutrition Commission (NFNC) is responsible for implementing national food and nutrition programs; and
4. The Zambia Bureau of Standards (ZABS) is responsible for setting and enforcing food safety standards. The institutions responsible for food safety have been established through clauses within the various acts of parliament.

Foodborne Illness and the Cost of Unsafe Food

Between 2010 and 2025, Zambia has faced several significant outbreaks of foodborne illnesses, such as cholera, typhoid fever, salmonellosis, and hepatitis A. Cholera is the most common foodborne illness in Zambia. It occurs quiet frequently, with serious consequences in some cases. In the 2010-12 period, Zambia reported multiple cholera outbreaks, with the highest number of cases recorded in 2010. Five years later (2017-18), the country experienced another serious outbreak of cholera, with more than 5,900 reported cases and 114 deaths recorded.¹



Another outbreak was reported in 2023-24 in all the ten provinces of the country. As of 12 February 2024, a total of 13,117 and 497 deaths were reported.²

¹ Nyambe Sinyange *et al* (2018) Cholera Epidemic — Lusaka, Zambia, October 2017–May 2018. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 67(19) p.556–559

² Kateule, E. *et al*. An assessment of the response to Cholera outbreak in Lusaka district, Zambia - October 2023 - February 2024

In January 2025, the country reported an outbreak of cholera in the north of the country. The cost of unsafe food extends far beyond immediate health risks, imposing significant economic and social burdens on a country. The financial cost of responding to foodborne illness outbreaks is substantial, requiring government expenditure on medical supplies, healthcare workers, emergency treatment centres, and public awareness campaigns. In Zambia, recurring cholera outbreaks have necessitated such costly interventions, diverting limited public health resources away from other critical needs.

During the 2023-24 cholera outbreak, Zambia reported 13,686 cases and 518 deaths, leading to extended school closures and economic disruptions.³

Foodborne illnesses have a significant impact on the health and productivity of the available labour force in the country because the number of people unfit for work increases. Those who are unwell but still report for work operate below their potential. Overall, production and productivity decline and this affects other important economic and social aspects of the country such as trade, education and tourism. The socio-economic development of the country also declines.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that unsafe food costs low- and middle-income countries approximately US\$110bn annually in lost productivity and medical expenses.⁴

The burden of foodborne illnesses disproportionately falls on low-income communities, where limited access to healthcare exacerbates financial strain. Affected households often experience a loss of income, higher medical expenses, and long-term economic instability. As poverty deepens, dependence on state welfare systems increases, creating a cycle of vulnerability that further stresses public resources. A World Bank report indicated that children under five years old bear 40 percent of the foodborne disease burden, with 125,000 deaths annually, underscoring the severe impact on vulnerable groups.⁵

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2023%E2%80%932024_Zambian_cholera_outbreak

⁴ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/food-safety>

⁵ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2018/10/23/food-borne-illnesses-cost-us-110-billion-per-year-in-low-and-middle-income-countries>

In Malawi, the intersection of climate change and food insecurity has led to increased vulnerability to foodborne diseases. Malnutrition and susceptibility to diseases such as cholera and malaria have increased.⁶

Need for a Centralised Food Safety Governance Approach

The institutional capacity for food safety governance in Zambia is constrained by several challenges, which include inadequate coherent legal frameworks, financial constraints, poor coordination among institutions, low public awareness and education on food safety, overall low enforcement of food safety standards, and inadequate capacity within the existing institutions charged with specific responsibility in the food safety sector.



Legal experts agree that legal frameworks cannot be perfect because they are shaped by what is referred to as entrenched social inequalities⁷ such that laws that may appear positive or neutral can perpetuate some form of inequality at different levels⁸ or impact a certain group of people negatively.⁹

⁶ Khumbize Kandodo Chiponda (2024) *People must understand: we in Malawi are paying for the climate crisis with our lives* Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2024/sep/23/malawi-climate-crisis-paying-with-our-lives>

⁷ Unger, R. (1983). *The Critical Legal Studies Movement*

⁸ Kamali, E. A. P. (2012). *The Legal Construction of Race: From Civil Rights to the War on Terror*

⁹ Gerrard, M. B. (2019). *Global Climate Change and U.S. Law*. American Bar Association

Therefore, the legal framework of food safety in Zambia cannot be perfect, but it is adequate to meet the desires of the country. Since the needs of the country and international developments are in continuous motions of change, what is most important is to make regular reviews and update the laws as needs arise.

A well-capacitated institutional framework is required and essential for the country to draw maximum benefit from the existing legal framework for food safety. One of the major constraints in the food safety management in Zambia is the absence of a centralised food regulatory authority that can usher in a culture of a unified approach to food safety management. Its establishment would improve efficiency and enforcement and eliminate any duplication of efforts. Part of the efficiency would be through quick response to emergencies arising from outbreaks of foodborne illnesses.

A central food regulatory authority would be critical in improving the enforcement of multilateral standards, monitoring progression towards internationally set targets and compliance to international food safety standards. In this regard, food exports would be enhanced and boost the participation of Zambian traders in the international market because the products would be competitive.

In addition, international trade is based on transparency, accountability and ability to show compliance with internationally set standards and procedures. All these factors would be improved if Zambia establishes a centralised food regulatory authority, resulting in better confidence and trust by international partners.

There are good examples in different countries showing that centralised food regulatory authorities enhance efficiency, accountability, and compliance with international standards, leading to improved public health outcomes and greater confidence in the food supply chain. For example, Ireland established the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) in 1999 as a centralised food safety regulatory body. This streamlined governance by coordinating various agencies, eliminating overlapping functions and enhancing operational efficiency.¹⁰

The Ministry of Primary Industries is the centralised food safety regulatory body for New Zealand. Among other things, its establishment enhanced efficiency by reducing

¹⁰ United States Government Accountability Office (2005) *Food Safety: Experiences of Seven Countries in Consolidating their Food Safety Systems* available at: <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/GAOREPORTS-GAO-05-212/html/GAOREPORTS-GAO-05-212.htm>

duplication and ensured consistent application of food safety measures across all sectors.¹¹

In Germany, the establishment of the Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR), established in 2002, has had positive effects similar to those in Ireland and New Zealand.¹² These examples demonstrate that Zambia would draw good benefits from establishing a centralised food regulatory authority.

It is important that a centralised food regulatory authority is underpinned by good capacity building programmes, research, public awareness campaigns, streamlined financing mechanisms, enhanced infrastructure and well-trained human capital. Zambia would also need to consider increasing investment in modern testing facilities and technologies to meet the desires and demands for local and international food safety standards.

Recommendations

Several challenges exist in the governance of food safety in Zambia and each one needs to be addressed. Prioritisation is necessary as it allows for focus and maximisation of benefits. The top-three policy considerations for gaining traction in the governance of food safety in Zambia would be:

Establish a Central Food Regulatory Authority

A unified body should be created to streamline governance, eliminate duplication of efforts, and provide clear leadership on food safety matters. This authority should have the mandate to harmonise policies, coordinate enforcement, and serve as a focal point for international collaboration.

Strengthen the Legal Framework

Assess the adequacy of the current legal framework and update them wherever gaps exist. This is normally carried out regularly to ensure that the legal framework remains responsive to new developments within the country and globally.

¹¹ International Finance Corporation (2021) Food Safety Reforms, Learning from the Best: The New Zealand Food Safety System in Case Studies. Available at: <https://www.ifc.org/content/dam/ifc/doc/2023/ifcnew-zealandfood-safetycasespublicationenglish-ifc-2023.pdf>

¹² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federal_Institute_for_Risk_Assessment

Adequately Resource the Regulatory Authority

Allocate more resources to agencies responsible for food safety to enhance their technical, infrastructural, and human resource capabilities. This includes modernizing laboratory equipment and technologies, providing specialised training for staff, and expanding inspection services to underserved areas.