

# Beyond standards: MI roots for a food safety culture in CLMV

Food safety is an integral part of the agricultural economies of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS). It is indispensable to the region's agri-trade as much as it remains a pervasive health concern. The strong, continued investments in agriculture have paved the way for the food trade to prosper: growth in the number of small and medium enterprises, innovations in food processing, and expansion to new markets, to name a few. Yet, foodborne illnesses – connected to numerous causes – continue to severely impact the health of many.

In Cambodia and Lao PDR, foodborne disease outbreaks have been widely reported, with cases commonly attributed to bacterial and parasitic worm infections. A 2013 Consumers International country report for Myanmar noted unhygienic conditions in food handling and sale in a local market. Food safety issues in Vietnam have received close media attention. A 2021 report from the Asian Development Bank pointed to the country's chemical and pesticide residue contamination of fresh produce.

## **Food standards: the backbone of food safety**

Strengthening safe food systems is critical to ensuring food safety – and here is where food standards come in. This year's World Food Safety Day theme, "*Food standards save lives*," emphasizes the role of food safety standards in protecting lives and livelihoods and promoting well-being.

The theme renders a powerful suggestion: **food standards are non-negotiables.**



These standards are the yardsticks upon which practices across all points of the agricultural supply chain are based. Codes of practice, such as the Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) and Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), ensure that contaminants and hazards are kept at bay at every stage of the value chain – from farm to plate. In driving agri-trade, food standards are a mark of confidence as enterprises do business with only those that share the same commitment to quality, safe food.

Attentiveness to food standards in the GMS, especially for countries like Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV), is of utmost importance. For instance, the development of country-specific GAP certification schemes and attempts to streamline national food safety policies have made significant inroads in the promotion of a safer food culture in these countries.

The work continues, however, as challenges persist. Inadequate resources and the need for highly skilled trained staff in testing labs continue to limit enterprises' export prospects. For other actors, especially micro and small food operators, efforts must be made to further promote awareness of food standards, as well as strengthen their capacities for adoption.



## ***Promoting a safe food culture through food standards***

With its decade-long advocacy on food safety in the CLMV, Mekong Institute is strategically positioned to respond to the challenge of championing food standards as the backbone of food safety. Its current initiative, the PROSAFE Project, supported by the New Zealand Aid Programme, has been an instrumental force in building regional and local competence of CLMV food actors to address food safety issues.

Food standards is a core topic in the more than 50 training programs of the Project offered since 2018. A dedicated module introduces participants to food safety regulations such as the Codex Alimentarius and the value of incorporating these standards within national quality infrastructure frameworks. Tailored programs that provide more focused discussions on GAP and GMP and even country-specific hygiene practices such as Good Restaurant Practices and Good Street Vending Practices are also offered. Complementing these capacity-building efforts are the PROSAFE Food Safety Forums – a series of multi-sectoral dialogue-for-action events that engage public and private stakeholders in order to mobilize a stronger food safety stakeholder network.

An integral component of the PROSAFE strategy is the Project alumni's post-training activities in their respective countries. These follow-through activities are the pebbles that create the much-needed positive ripples towards a strengthened culture of food safety practices in the region.

In Cambodia, PROSAFE alumni are capacitating enterprises on food safety management tools and practices to support the production of high-quality food products according to international food processing standards. Training graduates in Lao PDR and Myanmar are enhancing their enterprises' facilities and control operations – from worker hygiene and workflow to facility inspection protocols. In Vietnam, our training participants focus on campaigns that promote wider sector awareness of food poisoning cases and standards such as VietGAP and GlobalGAP.

Across CLMV, PROSAFE participants have also developed food safety regulations, whether at the enterprise or national level. A salient example is the work of a group of Cambodian alumni from the Ministry of Health who contributed to the drafting of the country's National Food Safety Policy.

While much work remains, much has also been accomplished. The PROSAFE Project has taken food safety advocacy a notch higher by not only training food actors on standards for compliance's sake but has ingrained the seeds of food safety in CLMV's food culture. Growing these seeds now relies on the strength and consistency of food safety champions. This World Food Safety Day, MI enjoins everyone to continue cultivating these seeds and embrace the vision of a greener and safer food and agriculture sector in the region.

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