



Primary schoolchildren in Sri Lanka enjoying a freshly cooked nutritious breakfast of boiled rice, vegetables, egg and fresh fruit. (Photo WFP Sri Lanka)

## Stepping into the future: leaving no one behind by improving food safety and health for all

Words by Frances Warnock

It is estimated that 733 million people may have faced hunger in 2023.<sup>1</sup> With just six years until 2030, the target date set by UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 to achieve zero hunger, trends are not moving in the right direction to end hunger and food insecurity. Everyone, everywhere should have the right to diverse, nutritious, affordable and safe food every day to achieve good health and live a productive life.

'Leave no one behind' is more than a slogan; it's a call to action for governments, development partners, the private sector, civil society, researchers and academia to ensure that all individuals, especially the most marginalised, poor and vulnerable people, including infants, have access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round.

Food safety is a key pillar of food security and a primary determinant of human health. Ensuring food safety is central to achieving all 17 SDGs by 2030.

Foodborne illness (FBI) is a serious health and economic problem

FOOD SAFETY ISSUES	PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS
Perishable seafood stored on the ground at ambient temperatures until sold	White tiled benchtops installed one metre above ground. Use clean ice in storage bins
Lack of refrigeration, cool storage facilities	Solar powered refrigeration and short supply chains
Lack of clean safe water for drinking, handwashing and maintaining vegetables fresh	Installation of large potable water tanks at central markets for vendors
Food waste and plastic packaging builds up around central food markets	Gizo markets successfully banned all plastic packaging

Table 1. Solomon Islands Central Food Markets infrastructure issues and challenges.

throughout the world and hinders progress towards achieving SDG 2 Zero Hunger by 2030. Around 600 million people fall ill each year and about 420,000 die as a result of eating contaminated foods. In Asia Pacific, there are about 275 million cases of FBI each year and an estimated 225,000 deaths. Most at risk are vulnerable women, the elderly, the immunocompromised and young children. Children under five years old make up 9% of the world's population but carry 34% of the burden of foodborne disease, being at a higher

risk of malnutrition and mortality due to eating unsafe food.<sup>2</sup>

'If it's not safe, it's not food'

### The role of women in agriculture, traditional and informal food sectors

More than 90% of women's employment in low-middle income countries (LMIC) is in the informal economy. Smallholder farmers produce around one-third of the world's food. Women play a vital role in producing and selling food for domestic markets, from small



Solomon Islands traditional foods sold in local markets – L-R sea grapes, edible ferns and Lao ethnic Hmong woman harvesting riverweed for Kaipen.

rural farmers, market vendors, street food vendors, school meals ‘caterers’ and household cooks. For many developing countries, unsafe food in informal channels accounts for a large majority of foodborne diseases attributed to marketed food. Most meat, milk, eggs and fish produced in developing countries are sold in traditional, domestic markets lacking modern infrastructure and escape effective food safety regulation, inspection and control.<sup>3</sup>

There is a lack of published information on traditional food systems, including food safety risks.<sup>4</sup>

### Food safety capacity strengthening from a people-centred approach

Food safety awareness, training and education are fundamentally important for all actors across food value chains. Food handlers should be aware of their roles and responsibilities in protecting food from contamination and preventing foodborne diseases. In many LMIC in Asia Pacific there is still limited availability of food safety training, especially for adults from diverse cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds.

Addressing food safety from a people-centred approach involves preventive approaches informed by evidence and a sound understanding of the drivers and barriers to Social and Behaviour Change (SBC).

●● **Give a woman a fish you feed her family for a day. Teach a woman to produce safe and nutritious foods you feed her whole community for a lifetime!** ●● **Frances Warnock**

Effective communication is vital, listening to the voices of all people, diverse languages and communication channels.<sup>5</sup> Qualitative behavioural observation studies conducted in the field, community consultations and focus group discussions provide valuable insights into local food safety issues and concerns. Information gathered from behavioural studies informs the development of relevant and meaningful food safety programs, messages, materials and communication channels.

Adult learning methods including interactive participatory approaches, practical demonstrations, facilitated group discussions and field visits to local food markets are more effective approaches than delivering food safety technical information as formal lectures. Food safety training requires careful planning with national government counterparts (food, agriculture, health and education), local community leaders and civil society organisations to ensure training meets local community needs.

### Food safety capacity building challenges

**Case study:** National School Meals Programme (NSMP) in Sri Lanka  
The Sri Lankan National School Meals

Programme (NSMP) serves all 1.7 million primary school children in Grades one-five a freshly cooked healthy meal every day before classes begin. Meals are prepared by home and school ‘caterers’ (around 18,000) across the country. But how safe is the food served to children at school? Contaminated food can negatively impact children’s mental and physical development and general well-being. Food safety risks associated with school meals are not necessarily assessed or addressed at all points, other than the physical characteristics of the cooking premises, which means there is the potential for children to fall ill.

In 2021, WFP Sri Lanka developed a food safety training package for capacity-strengthening activities with the support of the Australian Volunteers Program (AVP). In 2022, Food Safety Guidelines for School Meals were prepared following a Food Safety Risk Assessment Study of NSMP supported by the World Food Programme (WFP).

Unfortunately, the commitment that prevails at high levels of government to ensure the safety of the food prepared and served as part of NSMP has not translated to an implementation plan for strengthening



Training workshops on postharvest management of food safety and nutrition in Solomon Islands for 'Sup Sup' home gardeners, smallholder farmers, market vendors, women's groups, youth and agriculture extension officers (FAO 2023).

the capacity of relevant food inspectors and school caterers. This means that there is limited priority given to, or technical and financial resources provided for, Public Health Inspectors at district level to train and inspect caterers' homes for food safety certification.

**References**

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<p><b>Leave no one behind</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good development comes from empowering people with the tools to put their solutions into practice.</li> <li>• 'Leave no one behind' is a global vision for translation into many interlinking actions. Priorities must include tackling inequalities related to the availability and access to a diverse range of culturally acceptable, safe and nutritious foods for all.</li> <li>• Greater awareness and understanding of local food systems, traditional knowledge and cultural practices to inform food security interventions. Prioritize the development agenda of local communities.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Empowering women</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Decent work and financial returns for all women in low-middle income countries, including informal and traditional food sectors.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Food safety capacity strengthening using a people centred approach</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social behavioural research and 'evidence' to inform food safety and nutrition interventions, and integration of traditional and modern knowledge.</li> <li>• Capacity building activities on food safety and nutrition to be available and accessible for all actors across food value chains. Training to be contextual, relevant and meaningful.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Equal partnerships for sustainable development at global, national, regional and local levels</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UN Agencies to acknowledge a 'one-size fits all' top-down approach is not inclusive or sustainable.</li> <li>• Private sector and donors to co-fund food security, nutrition and food safety activities based on capacity to shift the dial towards achieving multiple SDGs within a reasonable timeframe.</li> <li>• Scaling up 'pilot projects' and locally led interventions shown to be successful or good potential to achieve sustainable outcomes by 2030.</li> <li>• School Meals Coalition<sup>6</sup> expanded across the globe and within countries ensuring all children receive a nutritious, safe cooked meal every day at school.</li> </ul>

Table 2. Navigating the future to improve food safety and health outcomes for all – Summary and Key Messages.