


Chapter 8

Assessing Consumer Awareness and Opinion Toward Food Safety Practices and Policies in the Maldives

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ABSTRACT

The Maldives relies completely on imported food for its staples such as rice, flour, and sugar. It is reported that the Maldives produces less than one-tenth of its overall food requirements. Due to its huge dependence on imported food products, Maldives is exposed to a high risk of contaminated food and foodborne illnesses caused within the supply chain. This chapter aimed to investigate the level of awareness among the public of the Maldives relating to food safety practices in the food industry. An online survey was developed and administered to the consumers in the Maldives. A total number of 369 usable responses were analyzed statistically. The findings highlight that even though there was a high level of awareness of the participants towards food safety in general, participants were poorly aware of the activities and the consumers' roles in the food safety practices. This study serves as a baseline study for future research in this area, particularly in the Maldives.

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BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Food safety is a major concern in all countries around the world. World Health Organization (WHO) estimated 600 million foodborne illnesses and 420,000 deaths in the year 2010 (WHO, 2015). It is reported that the foodborne diseases have caused the total productivity loss associated with foodborne disease in low- and middle-income countries was around US\$ 95.2 billion per year, and the annual cost of treating foodborne illnesses is estimated at US\$ 15 billion (World Bank, 2018). Food safety practices have become complex with the emerging trends and behaviors in the food supply chain, particularly during the preparation and processing stages.

Human is the primary stakeholder in food consumption framework. For decades, food safety is an aged concern since the day's humans have developed measures to make sure that the food consumed does not harm them in any way. Written records and problem-based solutions have been established to mitigate the contamination and to enhance the safety points of many products. Additionally, numerous public awareness programs have been conducted to increase public knowledge in food safety and to ensure that the food standards set by authorities are effectively implemented. In many countries, the proactive participation of consumer associations allows the consumer representatives involvement in policy reforms and implementation at national and international levels.

While a proper legal framework provides a detailed guideline for the food industry regarding to food safety management within their establishment, consumer awareness is necessary for the prevention and implementation of food safety measures in a community. It is known that a legal framework alone cannot ensure that the food will never pose a risk to any consumer (De Boer & Bast, 2018). Based on the code of ethics for international food trades as outlined in Codex Alimentarius, the consumers have the right to safe and quality food, as well as the right to express their opinions about the food control procedures, including standards set out by the governments and the food industries to ensure safe, sound and wholesomeness of the food (FAO & WHO, 2010).

Numerous studies relating to consumers' level of awareness toward food safety have been done in different demographic settings. Today the food travels at great distances from different countries, different farms, and factories before being passed on to the consumer. The world's increasing population and the consumers' needs for a variety of food have resulted in a more complex network of the food chain. Nonetheless, a complex food chain can cause contamination at any stage of the food chain. As a result, foodborne illnesses pose a risk to international public health safety and economic development (Uçar, Yilmaz, & Çakiroğlu, 2016). While this scenario has happened around the world with no exception to the Maldives. The Maldives has imported more than 95 percent of the food consumed from various

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