

## CORONAVIRUS GLOBAL TASK FORCE: A MODEL FOR RESPONDING TO FOOD SYSTEM CRISES

*FEED THE FUTURE INNOVATION LAB FOR FOOD SAFETY*

### PROJECT OVERVIEW & APPROACH

Food systems are vulnerable to disruptions from conflict, climate change, natural disasters, and pandemics. The International COVID-19 Rapid Response Project, managed by the Feed the Future Innovation Lab for Food Safety in 2020 and 2021, helped mitigate food safety and food security challenges during the pandemic. The project used a train-the-trainer approach to launch an international food safety task force that provided tools, including virtual office hours and guides, to reduce person-to-person coronavirus transmission in the food industry, piloting an agile, effective approach for responding to food system crises.

#### Task Force Model

The use of a task force model rapidly strengthened in-country capacity, creating an expert community to support food safety and security. Food safety experts were recruited in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Kenya, Nepal, and Senegal. The Cornell Institute for Food Safety (IFS@CU) provided mentorship and training to develop their knowledge, skills, and confidence in answering questions and countering misinformation.

#### Virtual Office Hours

Task force members, with support from IFS@CU, offered live, interactive office hours to consumers and food industry personnel using online platforms. The office hours attracted a broad range of stakeholders, including food processors, food retailers, researchers, government officials, and consumers. The sessions enabled the task force to answer questions, identify emerging concerns and challenges, and develop appropriate resources. The majority of survey respondents found virtual office hours helpful (86%) and planned to make changes to their COVID-19 mitigation practices (66%).

#### Customized Resources

The task force created 25 country-specific resources in Bangla, French, Khmer, Nepali, and Swahili, including video FAQs, checklists, decision trees, and a guide to handling fresh produce. The downloadable e-versions enabled businesses to modify them for their unique production environments.



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## IMPACTS

- **Food Security.** Effective, agile outreach supported food businesses in reducing the spread of the virus in essential workplaces through science-based practices and helped prevent shutdowns that would disrupt food supplies.
- **Food Safety.** Rapid deployment of science-based guidance combated misinformation which threatened to redirect resources away from food safety practices (e.g., focus on disinfecting food packaging) or introduce new food safety risks (e.g., use of disinfectants on fruits and vegetables).
- **Supporting Social-Behavioral Change.** The program bridged policy and practice by providing “how to” guides such as decision trees and flow charts as well as evergreen food safety resources with lasting relevance post-pandemic.
- **Capacity Strengthening.** Through office hours, the project directly strengthened local and regional food safety capacity and built a regional network of food safety experts.
- **Gender empowerment.** The use of online platforms for the office hours was effective for reaching both men and women: Across all sessions, 55.5% of participants were women.
- **Public-Private Partnerships.** The project strengthened partnerships between private industry and university-based researchers by providing a direct forum with a shared purpose for interaction between the two groups.

“ The experience of attending the virtual meeting on food industry during the time of Coronavirus helped my business [and] helped me break the stigma of washing vegetables with soap or detergent, [which] was completely unnecessary. ”

Manisha M., Nepal

“ Great piece of information, since there is a lot of fear that has been instilled in people’s minds about this virus. It will be very important to share such kind of information. ”

James N., Kenya

## FUTURE APPLICATIONS

This train-the-trainer, task force approach holds promise for bolstering food system resilience as well as rapid deployment in response to a crisis that disrupts food system stability, such as war, climate change, natural disasters, or future pandemics. Potential applications include:

**Outbreaks.** Outbreaks require accurate, timely public communication and action by stakeholders across food value chains. An expert task force can strengthen local capacity to coordinate efforts to promote science-based information and engage stakeholders in managing the outbreak and protecting public health.

**Food loss and waste.** Reducing food waste can increase the availability and affordability of nutritious foods while reducing climate impacts, and a task force could support efforts to reduce contamination and avoid unnecessary food waste.

**Informal markets.** Traditional markets provide access to nutritious, perishable foods but often have gaps in food safety practices. A task force could develop local expertise to strengthen food safety at the point of sale.

**Natural disasters.** In the aftermath of earthquakes, floods, and other natural disasters, food insecurity and food safety could be addressed by a task force to connect key stakeholders in a coordinated manner, including government, private industry, and international aid agencies.