

The Food Safety Law in Lebanon: What Is Next?

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Abstract

The major objective of the paper will aim at preparing a proposed program on what should be done by the Lebanese Government in order to reach a better level in Food Safety conditions. A detailed analysis is made of these articles and confronts them with the work done by assisting the nine agencies dealing with Food Safety in Lebanon. The problem is that so far, we don't have a program or a policy dealing with Food Safety in Lebanon. The Food Safety law will help a great deal to fill this gap.

The second objective is to look into more details into the problems of education and training of professionals dealing with Food Safety in Lebanon. We pride ourselves in Lebanon, for the number universities we have. However, the number of universities dealing with agriculture will not exceed six and those dealing with nutrition and food safety are the American University of Beirut (AUB) and the Lebanese American University (LAU). Some incentives should be given to the other four universities teaching Agriculture in Lebanon to do some research and give courses dealing with Food Safety.

The third objective of this new program refers to the urgency for the Councils of Ministers in Lebanon to establish the FSLC and appoint its chairman and members. When the FSLC is established it has to organize itself and prepare all the documents mentioned in article 27 of the food safety law. Then FSLC will prepare the program or food policy in Lebanon in cooperation with representatives from the nine agencies. A food Safety System will be established this way and should contain a sub-system of monitoring and evaluation of activities and responsibilities. This would help in the preparation of the annual report referred to in article 31 of the Food Safety Law. A continuous training program should be programmed annually between FSLC and representatives of the nine agencies, in cooperation with the universities teaching Nutrition and Food Safety. LAU, within its Food Safety program is giving annually a course with a certificate in Food Safety. This certificate was highly appreciated by the Syndicate of the Lebanese Food Industries (SLFI) and the General Union of Arab Chambers of Commerce. They were willing to pay higher salaries for those having the certificate on Food Safety training.

Keywords: Food safety; FDA; Nutrition; FSLC; LIBNOR

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Introduction

On 24 October 2016, the Food Safety Law in Lebanon was approved [1] and published by the Parliament as Law N0:35. Consumers' protection advocates, in Lebanon, were waiting for the Government to implement the provisions of the new safety law which will improve public health.

The Situation before the Law

The majority of the Lebanese public and international community questioned how come that Lebanon waited so long until the end of the Twentieth Century without having a Law covering Food Safety? It was until the beginning of the 21st Century (in 2004) that a draft Law was introduced, by the Minister of Economy

and Trade, Dr. Bassil Flueihan, discussed and finally approved by the Parliament. The answer to this query came out that special private interests of some Lebanese agricultural producers and merchants were benefitting from the loose enforcement of the law and regulations to seek the highest profit possible. In fact, before the publication of the Food Safety Law, there were many government agencies in the different ministries, all of them were dealing with Food Safety, in one way or the other. But there was no coordination among them whatsoever. As a matter of fact the Ministry of Agriculture was dealing with regulations and rules related to production of agricultural crops and animal products, marketing until reaching the consumers. These rules and regulations were many. But the administrative and technical capabilities of the Ministry were too weak to be able to cover all issues of food safety and inspectors did not exist at all.

The same applies to the Ministry of Economy and Trade where the Department of the Consumers [2] Protection is responsible of the rules and regulations pertaining to the implementation of the law related to the protection of the consumer. However, the Ministry was never able of covering the whole territory of Lebanon and they never had the capacity to cover some if not all problems related to food safety.

The Ministry of Public Health [3], relatively speaking, was doing a little bit better.

LIBNOR (the Lebanese Norms Organization) located at the Ministry of Industry, compared to other administrations was doing better, but was never able to cover all agricultural commodities in Lebanon.

The Ministry of Environment, although it had good ministers since its inception, the problems of food safety were of minor priority to the Ministry.

The Ministry of Social Affairs did not give any priority to problems of food safety [4].

The Municipalities which cover the whole territory of Lebanon, which is a good advantage, because they are in contact with many users of food; but they were never trained in this field and they never tried to be responsible in this area.

As we can see these are scattered activities, rules and regulations on food safety in many ministries and organizations, but unfortunately there was no coordination among them, and there was no system or a policy on food safety. Hence, the importance of having a new law concerning this field.

The Tasks of the Food Safety Commission

The new Law on Food Safety, in articles 22-23, there is a detailed description of the Food Safety Lebanese Commission (FSLC) responsibilities. It is referred to as FSLC. In short, it is the FDA of Lebanon.

The first task of FSLC is to prepare a proposed program on what

should be done by the Lebanese Government in order to reach a better level in Food Safety conditions. A detailed analysis is made of these articles and confronts them with the work done by existing agencies dealing with food safety in Lebanon. The problem is that so far, we did not have a program or a policy or a strategy dealing with food safety in Lebanon. The New Food Safety Law will help a great deal to fill this gap. That means that the first task of FSLC is to build-up the system of food safety and sub-systems in all the ministries and organizations.

The second task for FSLC is to put its house in order in preparing and drafting for the approval of the Council of Ministers:

- The bye-laws of FSLC;
- The terms of reference of its staff;
- The financial regulations pertaining to FSLC.

The third task for FSLC, under article 29, is to prepare the Strategy on Food Safety of Lebanon. In other words, the task for FSLC is to define the system on food safety, which will prepare the program or food policy in Lebanon, in cooperation with representatives from other organizations and agencies. A food safety system will establish the system of monitoring and evaluation of activities and responsibilities. This will help in the preparation of the annual report referred to in article 31 of the food safety law.

The fourth task is to look into more details into the problems of education and training of professionals dealing with food safety in Lebanon. We pride ourselves in Lebanon, for the number of universities we have. However, the number of universities dealing with agriculture will not exceed six universities and those dealing with nutrition and food safety are the American University of Beirut (AUB), Lebanese American University (LAU), and, to some extent, Kaslik University. Some incentives should be given to the other three universities teaching Agriculture in Lebanon to do some research and give courses dealing with food safety and nutrition.

Training in Food Safety

A continuous training program should be established, annually, between FSLC and representatives of other agencies of the Lebanese Government, in cooperation with the universities teaching Nutrition and Food Safety. LAU, within its Food Safety program is giving annually a course with a certificate in Food Safety [5]. This certificate was highly appreciated by the Syndicate of the Lebanese Food Industries (SLFI) and the General Union of Arab Chambers of Commerce. They were willing to pay higher salaries for those having the certificate on Food Safety training.

The success of this new law depends on how it will be implemented. A campaign should immediately be launched, now that the law is enacted, to draw attention to its importance and added value to Lebanese citizens.

A major task for FSLC is to impose its respect to the other agencies of the government dealing with food safety and have good cooperation between the two sides.

Conclusion

We don't need new laws and regulations concerning food safety as we need better trained people to implement them. The major task, were ones existence, is in the area of inspectors, almost everywhere FSLC should have its own team of well-trained inspectors, to fill the gap of the ministries.

Well organized meetings under the leader's help of FSLC should be established regularly to discuss problems and find solutions.

Finally, accreditations for new laboratories should be initiated by FSLC, to help and assist the existing ones at the Ministry of Agriculture, in Fanar.

References

- 1 (2016) Lebanese Official Journal.
- 2 Interview by the author at the Ministry of Economy and Trade.
- 3 Interview by the author at the Ministry of Public Health.
- 4 Interview by the author at the Ministry of Social Affairs.
- 5 Interview by the author at AUB, LAU and Kaslik Universities.