

The Regional Network of Food Testing Laboratories in Western and Central Africa: Support for a Quality Assurance Approach

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Abstract

As part of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs' "Agri-food quality program", a regional network of public and private sector food quality labs has recently been established, with the aim of providing information and facilitating methodology and equipment exchanges and laboratory accreditation. The four founding members of the network are Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal. Technical support is being provided by CIRAD's Animal Production and Veterinary Medicine Department and various other French institutions involved in the food safety area.

Background

With financial support from the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, three preparatory actions were carried out from November 1998 to March 2000:

- A feasibility study (November-December 1998), which drew up precise monographs on all the food testing laboratories of five countries (Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Mali and Senegal), and assessed their demands in terms of methodological, logistic, information and training support, and specific priority goals. The study concluded with the proposal that a regional network be established.
- A feedback seminar (Abidjan, May 1999), gathering 40 participants from four countries (Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali and Senegal). In addition to presentation and discussion of the feasibility study, this meeting provided the opportunity for general presentations on quality assurance, accreditation and the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points (HACCP) method, and allowed the definition of short- and medium-term structures and goals of the future network.
- A general assembly for the launching of the network (Dakar, March 2000), gathering 43 participants from the same four countries. The assembly meeting was followed by a workshop on the topic: "Metrology: methodology and application to food-testing laboratories".

Twenty-three public and private sector laboratories from the four countries participating in the Dakar meeting are currently members of this network. Some network partners, who have definite but unevenly spread skills and who feel professionally isolated, have clearly expressed their wish to be part of the network. These partners feel that the network should facilitate an opening for them to product certification for the national market (despite the low current demand for their services), the regional market, and above all to exports to the European Union of goods such as fishery products.

The network is based on the voluntary participation of its members. In the long run, it should be able to ensure its own institutional and financial permanence. During this establishment phase, methodological and logistic support is being provided by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as part of its "Agri-food quality program." Responsibility for coordination of network activities lies with CIRAD-EMVT, and a range of French structures are providing technical support (ADILVA – the association of directors of veterinary and food laboratories, AFSSA – the French food safety agency, the Pasteur Institute, RAEMA – the network of analyses and exchanges in food microbiology, AFNOR – the French standardization agency, COFRAC – the French committee on accreditation).

Network Goals

The main goals of this interactive regional network for intellectual, methodological and equipment exchanges are:

- Information: through the publication of international regulations and standard analysis methods.
- Promotion of laboratory certification and accreditation: by introducing a logical quality-assurance approach. This approach has already been adopted by a number of laboratories. The declared goal of the national authorities concerned is to have at least one accredited laboratory per country. "State approval", with no international recognition, no longer enables laboratories to meet World Trade Organization (WTO) requirements.
- Expertise: to provide internal and external expertise for network members.
- Promotion of South-South cooperation.
- Rapid attainment of specific, priority goals including a document watch on standards and regulations, training in analysis methods and HACCP, external evaluation by COFRAC, maintenance of laboratory equipment, metrology (weight, temperature), inter-comparison (inter-calibration with RAEMA).

Priority actions to be carried out in 2001 include finalization of the network's constitutional institutional texts, publishing a "Member Directory", setting up an electronic discussion forum, organizing 2 metrology workshops in Dakar and Abidjan for the technical managers of the network laboratories during the first trimester of 2001 on the topic of: "Metrology (weight, temperature): daily practices in your laboratory."

Other countries have expressed interest in joining the network, notably Guinea and Burkina Faso.