PACA | Partnership for Aflatoxin Control in Africa | Partenariat pour la lutte contre l'aflatoxine en Afrique | Parceria para o Controle da Aflatoxina em África | الشراكة من أجل مكافحة الافلاتوكسين في أفريقيا

Overview of a Scoping Study to Assess the Policy and Regulatory Environment and Technical Capacity for Aflatoxin Control in Africa

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The Aflatoxin Challenge

Aflatoxins are naturally occurring toxins produced by certain fungi, most importantly *Aspergillus flavus and Aspergillus parasiticus.* Aflatoxins contaminate many African dietary staples such as maize, groundnuts, rice, and cassava, particularly under certain conditions: dry weather during planting, high moisture during harvest, and inadequate drying and storage of crops. FAO estimates that 25% of world food crops are affected, and countries in latitudes between 40°N and 40°S—which includes all of Africa—are more at risk of aflatoxin contamination. As a result, millions of people living throughout the continent consume unsafe levels of aflatoxin through their diets.

Aflatoxin ingestion in humans is known to cause liver disease, and has been associated with immune-system suppression and growth stunting. Beyond its health impacts on humans, aflatoxin has negative impacts on the production of healthy livestock, causing a decrease in production of milk and eggs; leaving toxic residues in dairy, meat and poultry products; and causing serious illness to animals. The impact of aflatoxin contamination along the food chain on the health of humans and animals in turn causes a significant threat to food security and livelihoods.

Background on the Scoping Study

The Partnership for Aflatoxin Control in Africa (PACA) aims to provide leadership and coordination for Africa's aflatoxin control efforts, acting primarily as a convenor, knowledge manager, and resource mobilizer. PACA's mission is to support agricultural development, safeguard consumer health and facilitate trade by catalyzing, coordinating and increasing effective aflatoxin control along agricultural value chains in Africa. One focus activity identified in PACA's 10-Year Strategy and Strategic Direction is to collaborate with Regional Economic Communities (RECs) and national governments on review, formulation, and harmonization of regulatory frameworks for aflatoxin control. The Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA) is a regional integration group of nineteen African

states[1] which have agreed to promote regional integration through trade development and to develop their natural and human resources for the mutual benefit of all their peoples. COMESA, in collaboration with the African Union through PACA and key partners, the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture (IITA), and U.S Agency for International Development (USAID), convened a workshop on the "Aflatoxin Challenge in Eastern and Southern Africa" in Lilongwe, Malawi from the 11th -13th of March, 2014. The goals of the workshop were to sensitize key stakeholders on the aflatoxin challenge in the East and Southern Africa region, to assess the status of countries' efforts to develop comprehensive solutions to control aflatoxin, and to set regional priorities and begin to develop a regional action plan on aflatoxin mitigation to enhance intra-regional trade and consumer health.

COMESA and PACA agreed to conduct a desktop scoping study to assess the policy landscape in the region to inform the workshop deliberations and guide the action planning process for aflatoxin management. The objectives of the scoping study are to assess policies, regulations, and standards on aflatoxins in the COMESA region, as well as existing aflatoxin testing capacities (both laboratory facilities and laboratory technicians).

The findings of the study will be used by COMESA and PACA to identify priorities for regulatory action for food safety and aflatoxin control in the region.

Methodology

The main tool used to collect data was a questionnaire. The questions in the study were carefully selected by the PACA Secretariat representatives and COMESA Secretariat representatives and cover the required scope of the policies, regulations and standards in place as well as the technical capacity for aflatoxin management in the different states.

The scope of the study was the COMESA member states. In each of the relevant institutions in the member states, key contacts were identified through the COMESA and PACA secretariats. These contacts were selected primarily on the grounds that contacts were in authoritative positions at relevant institutions with the responsibility for aflatoxin management in their respective member states. The key contacts then solicited for the information to complete the questionnaire. The information from the completed questionnaires was complemented by secondary sources published prior to the scope study.

[1] COMESA Member States include: Burundi, Comoros, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Libya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritius, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sudan, Swaziland, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe)

Initial Findings and Next Steps

Initial findings from the COMESA region revealed that with increased research and awareness of the negative impact mycotoxins on trade and human and animal health, policies, regulations and standards have been established in many of the COMESA member states to protect consumers from the harmful effects of aflatoxin as well as promote international trade. However, many states in the COMESA region lack the capacity and resources to enforce the regulatory and policy frameworks for aflatoxin management. This creates an economic burden, specifically, with regional and international trade, as products that do not meet the aflatoxin standards are either rejected at the border, rejected in channels of distribution, assigned a reduced price, or diverted to non-human or even non-fee uses. One reason for the weakness in the regulatory environment is the lack of analytical capacity and evidence-based research to increase awareness and inform policy formulation and implementation.

COMESA will distribute the draft findings to participating member states for review and validation of the study findings. Once the report is finalized, it will be shared with the PACA community and COMESA member states. In addition, given the valuable information generated through the study, the PACA Secretariat has decided to expand the study to other parts of the continent. PACA has engaged in an initial conversation with ECOWAS and looks forward to working with ECOWAS to document the aflatoxin policies, regulations, standards, and laboratory capacity already in place in the West African region.