Chapter 4
The Applications and Uses of GFSI-Benchmarked Food Safety Schemes in Relation to Retail

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4.1 Introduction

The Global Food Safety Initiative (GFSI) was established in 2000 by the CIES—The Food Business Forum, which is now known as the Consumer Goods Forum (CGF). It is a business-driven initiative that is managed by the CGF and was founded following a number of food safety issues in Europe that had significantly impacted upon consumer confidence. The GFSI provides a platform for collaboration between some of the world's leading food safety experts from retailer, manufacturer and food service companies, service providers associated with the food supply chain, international organisations, academia and government (http://www.mygfsi.com/) (GFSI 2013). This collaboration is achieved mainly through the establishment of Working Groups that address specifically identified issues that are deemed important to the intent of the GFSI. The mission of the GFSI has remained unchanged since 2000 and is to drive continuous improvement in food safety to strengthen consumer confidence worldwide.

4.2 Bench-Marking System

One of the main objectives of the GFSI was to reduce the number of audits that suppliers were required to undergo to meet an increasing number of different retailer requirements. The auditing carried out by retail technologists or companies

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commissioned by retailers lead to significant "audit fatigue" in the food industry, which resulted in high costs, waste of valuable time and unnecessary duplication, and it was not uncommon for some manufacturers to receive up to 20 food safety audits per annum from multiple customers. Simultaneously, ensuring the safety of foods supplied to retailers and hence, to the consumer remained of paramount importance. The ultimate goal of the GFSI therefore became "once audited, accepted everywhere". The approach decided upon to provide a means of achieving this goal, was to introduce a bench-marking process where owners of food safety schemes, based on the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) System, could apply to the GFSI for bench marking of their schemes. The bench-marking process would be carried out against specific requirements contained in a Guidance Document published by the GFSI. The intention was for retailers and other sectors of the food industry to accept food supplied by a supplier certified to one of the bench-marked schemes in lieu of the preferred scheme or standards of that company; the principle being that the bench-marking system created equivalence across the approved schemes, thereby offering a comparable level of food safety. In this way, flexibility was introduced into the marketplace and suppliers could decide on which GFSI recognised food safety scheme to implement, whilst food safety audits were reduced without compromising the safety of the food supplied. This approach also offered a level of confidence to the retailers and other sectors of the food industry in that these recognised schemes had undergone a rigorous and independent evaluation. The Guidance Document is revised as needed to incorporate updated requirements for food, feed and service provision schemes. To date, a number of pre- and post-farm gate food safety schemes have been approved by the GFSI and such lists are regularly updated on the GFSI website (http://www.mygfsi.com).

4.3   Certification and Accreditation

The GFSI does not undertake any certification or accreditation activities. However, it does require that third-party certification audits carried out against a GFSI bench-marked scheme are conducted by Certification Bodies that are accredited by an Accreditation Body; the Accreditation Body in turn is required to be a member of the International Accreditation Forum (IAF). Through this membership, assurance is given to users, of the competence and impartiality of the body accredited and hence the certifications provided (http://www.iaf.nu//articles/About/2) (IAF 2013).

Concerns about effectiveness of third-party audits and particularly auditor competence have been expressed by a number of parties in recent years. However, there are a number of processes in place to provide assurance that third-party audits are carried out by technically competent and professional auditors.

In accordance with the requirements of the GFSI Guidance Document, all recognised schemes must have in place criteria for the appointment, management and continued integrity of any food safety auditor operating within the framework of their schemes. This includes requirements in relation to qualification, sector

knowledge, training and work experience; in addition, there are also requirements regarding continuous professional development and the maintenance of legislative and sector specific knowledge.

Certification Bodies working within the framework of any recognised GFSI scheme require accreditation to internationally recognised ISO standards. These standards clearly define the requirements of how a Certification Body operates an effective management system and therefore controls and manages its auditors. As these standards are used for the accreditation of organisations, national Accreditation Bodies regularly undertake surveillance assessments to ensure continued compliance with the ISO standard's requirements. These surveillance assessments include a detailed review of audit documentation and witness assessment of auditors.

In addition to the controls undertaken by Accreditation Bodies, schemes recognised by the GFSI are also required to have in place a series of measures to monitor Certification Body performance, which include a risk-based programme of Certification Body office audits and supplier audits to review the performance of the Certification Body's auditors.

The competence and performance of food safety auditors is critically important to the integrity of the GFSI and the GFSI recognised schemes. Stakeholder consultation has been used by GFSI to prioritise work streams for their Technical Working Groups and auditor competence has been identified as an area which is critically important for the effectiveness of food safety audits. In 2011 the GFSI Board mandated that a Technical Working Group be formed specifically focussing on food safety auditor competence and following work carried out by this Group during 2011, the Auditor Competence Scheme Committee was formed in 2012. The purpose and role of this Committee was to continue to develop competence assessment methodology and credentialing of GFSI recognised scheme auditors, to investigate the possible personal certification of food safety auditors and to work with other interested parties involved in this area of work.

4.4 Global Markets Capacity Building Programme

In 2008 the GFSI recognised that there were many food businesses across the world, in both developed and developing countries, which were finding difficulty in implementing HACCP-based food safety management schemes. Both small and large, less developed businesses fall into this category and these would benefit significantly from a single, internationally recognised programme that would assist them, through continuous improvement process to develop to the point where the implementation of a GFSI recognised food safety management scheme could be considered. This programme was launched in 2011 and became known as the Global Markets Capacity Building Programme (GMCBP). In this way, capacity building in food safety is achieved, whilst access to local markets is facilitated and a system for mutual acceptance along the supply chain at this "entrance level" is created. The programme is based on key requirements extracted from the GFSI Guidance Document, but is

primarily based upon the Codex General Principles of Food Hygiene Code of Practice (CAC/RCP 1-1969, Rev 4-2003). The programme is designed as a noncertification assessment process, which is carried out within a defined time period. It consists of three tiers of work, i.e. Tier One where a series of food safety requirements known as the GFSI Basic Level Requirements should be implemented by the food business within a period of 12 months. Thereafter, the food business should progress to the next tier, Tier Two, where a second series of food safety requirements, the GFSI Intermediate Level Requirements should be implemented, also within a 12-month period. Therefore within a 2-year period, the food business should be in a position to progress to full certification to a GFSI recognised food safety scheme. A number of documents have been developed by the GMCBP Technical Working Groups, which serve the purpose of providing guidance to the food business and assessors establishing compliance to the GFSI Basic and Intermediate Level Requirements.

Although the GFSI has issued guidance documents in the form of a downloadable "toolkit", a number of organisations have developed training manuals and courses for suppliers wishing to implement the GMCBP. Numerous pilot programmes to test market readiness of the GFSI Basic and Intermediate Level Requirements have been successfully carried out in many regions of the world, including Ukraine, Egypt, Russia, Chile, Kazakhstan and Malaysia. Many of the pilot programmes of the GMCBP were undertaken in partnership with organisations such as the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the International Finance Corporation (IFC), who have worked with major retailers in those countries, supporting the training programmes in order to build capacity within the suppliers to those retailers. These pilot programmes have been successful in that not only are suppliers trained, but their businesses are initially assessed against the GFSI Basic and/or Intermediate Level Requirements. Thereafter they are mentored for a period of time by experienced consultants to assist with the implementation of the Basic and/or Intermediate Level Requirements. At the end of the mentorship period, the suppliers are re-assessed and these assessment results are compared with their initial assessments. Significant improvement has been found consistently for all the pilot programmes conducted and levels of up to 45 % and 33 % improvement for Basic Level and Intermediate Level, respectively, have been recorded (personal communication, Ali Badarneh, UNIDO). More recently, UNIDO has expanded its work to include a number of selected African countries in which to run similar programmes of which the first pilot project occurred in Zambia in May 2102. This is being done in conjunction with specific South African retailers, who are expanding extensively in to the rest of Africa.

4.5 Benefits of the GFSI Approach for the Retail Sector

The GFSI has been in place for over 14 years and has grown significantly in the last 6 years where large corporate retailers, food manufacturers and food service companies have recognised the benefits of the GFSI approach.

One of the original objectives of the GFSI was to reduce the number of food safety audits, which has been successfully introduced, especially when in 2007 a number of multinational retailers agreed to utilise any of the GFSI recognised schemes. Since 2007 a number of other very large organisations have also used this approach which has led to reduced duplication, increased efficiency and significant cost saving, especially within the food production sector.

Other benefits gained by companies implementing GFSI recognised food safety schemes include improved product safety, better access to market, improved consumer confidence, decrease in product recalls and associated costs, attainment of preferred buyer status, improved corporate image, enhanced production efficiency and improvement with legislative compliance.

The GFSI was introduced in 2000 to work with a number of food safety schemes and the GFSI approach does promote "healthy competition" between scheme owners and it could be argued that this has driven continuous improvement of supporting systems and procedures both within the schemes and the GFSI itself.

The sixth version of the GFSI Guidance Document introduced the broadening of the scopes of schemes GFSI can recognise and it is envisaged that by mid-2014 any food and feed industry schemes can apply for GFSI recognition. The GFSI scopes of recognition will also cover relevant food industry service sectors such as Storage and Distribution, which will mean that there will be a complete linkage of food safety requirements across the total supply chain.

References

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