

# Arab Food Regulators Network (AFoRNet)

## Network of Senior Food Regulators from the Arab Region

### *Concept and Future Directions*

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#### TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abbreviations .....	2
1. Background and Rationale for the Arab Food Regulators' Network.....	2
1.1 The International Heads of Food Agency Forum.....	2
1.2 The Global Food Regulators Summit (GFRS) .....	3
1.3 African Food Regulatory Authorities Forum .....	3
1.4 The Caribbean Food Safety Taskforce.....	4
1.5 The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Food Safety Cooperation Forum.....	4
1.6 The Arab Taskforce on Food Safety.....	4
1.7 The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Food Safety Committee .....	4
1.8 Technical Committee 5.....	4
1.9 Practical Food Regulatory Cooperation Networks.....	4
2. Rationale for the Creation of the Arab Food Regulators' Network (AFoRNet) .....	5
3. Proposed Modus Operandi for AFoRNet and Proposed Initiatives .....	7
4. Conclusion and Proposed Next Steps .....	8

## Abbreviations

<b>AForNet</b>	Arab Food Regulators Network
<b>APEC</b>	Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation
<b>FSANZ</b>	Food Standards Australia New-Zealand
<b>FSQC</b>	Oman's Food Safety and Quality Center
<b>GFoRSS</b>	Global Food Regulatory Science Society
<b>GFRS</b>	Global Food Regulators Summit
<b>GSO</b>	GCC Standardization Organization
<b>NFSA</b>	National Food Safety Authority of Egypt
<b>SPS</b>	Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures
<b>TC5</b>	Technical Committee 5

## 1. Background and Rationale for the Arab Food Regulators' Network

Addressing current and future challenges of food security and food safety requires multi-faceted interventions that include: enhancing the food production systems, curbing food loss and food waste and innovating the identification and development of new food sources and new food production processes, including an improved reliance on traditional food sources. The performance of food control systems is a key determinant of these interventions and is supported by well-functioning food competent authorities, which deploy the relevant food regulatory functions in support of managing the interactions among and between actors of food production systems from farm to table<sup>1</sup>.

**Food regulators are constantly called upon to address an increasing number of issues** and to meet the multiple obligations of their mandate, but also to act as the reference source for guidance to food business operators, consumers, as well as other intermediaries, such as service providers and food traders.

The development of collaborative approaches between food regulators at the global and regional level are an imperative to enable the fulfilment of an increasingly complex and interdependent health, food production and food trade environment.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission, the international food standard setting body under the auspices of Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the World Health Organization, offers a forum for regulators to meet and discuss the development of international food safety and quality standards. Collaboration between food regulators is at the core of this forum and is witnessed regularly in the context of the development of international and regional food standards. However, given the extensive international standard setting agenda, and while meetings of the Codex Alimentarius Commission and its subsidiary bodies (Codex technical committees) constitute an important venue for regulators to meet and exchange expertise, this engagement can rarely go beyond the Codex agenda.

Other avenues of food regulatory collaboration have been developed regionally and internationally, such as:

### 1.1 The International Heads of Food Agency Forum

The Forum is an informal gathering of senior representatives of like-minded international food regulators and food risk assessment agencies at the heads of agency level, convened with the aim to facilitate **engagement and dialogue** targeting the advancement of a common **collaborative**

<sup>1</sup> The introduction is inspired by the same rationale drafted by the first author of this paper, for the purposes of the creation of the International Heads of Food Agencies Forum (IHFAF), the concept of which was developed by the first author as part of his advisory support to the Saudi Food Safety Authority (SFDA) from 2017 to 2020.

**agenda** of work sharing opportunities in support of each respective food regulatory mandate. This group was initiated by the Saudi Food and Drug Authority, the Food Safety Agency of Ireland and Food Standards Australia New-Zealand (FSANZ), based on a concept developed by the first Author of this paper.

It was designed to include an increasing number of food regulators and currently<sup>2</sup> includes the participation of:

- The China National Centre of Food Safety Risk Assessment.
- The French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health Safety.
- The Food Safety Commission of Japan.
- The Public Authority of Food and Nutrition of Kuwait.
- The National Office of Food Safety of Morocco.
- The Singapore Food Safety Agency.
- The Food Standards Agency of the United Kingdom (FSA).
- The Danish Veterinary and Food Administration, Food Standards Scotland.
- The Economic and Food Safety Authority Portugal.
- The Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain of Belgium.
- The German Food Safety Authority.
- The Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety.
- The Federal Institute for Risk Assessment of Germany.
- The Ministry for Primary Industries New-Zealand.
- The Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority.
- The Chilean Food Safety Agency.

## **1.2 The Global Food Regulators Summit (GFRS)**

The GFRS was created by India as part of its leadership of the G20 in 2023 and has become an annual meeting to review the latest developments in food regulatory matters, including support to discussions on emerging issues. The 2024 GFRS meeting gathered representatives of 70 countries, most of which were representatives of food competent authorities. The GFRS is developing to provide a “unique platform to food regulators of various nations for exchanging information on food product regulatory and safety requirements, with an emphasis on fostering cooperation between nations in the realm of food safety standards”<sup>3</sup>.

## **1.3 African Food Regulatory Authorities Forum<sup>4</sup>**

The Forum was created in 2023 by the African Union Commission, in response to a proposal by the National Food Safety Authority of Egypt (NFSA), with the aim to gather representatives of African food competent authorities at the heads of authority level. The forum was developed to help shape an agenda of collaborative initiatives to contribute to the development of a path forward for **African food regulatory harmonization** and integration as part of the implementation of the African Continental Free Trade Area; also, to address common challenges faced by African food competent authorities and the food and agri-food production sector. This forum was designed to serve as a foundation for the governance structure of the soon to be established **African Food Safety Agency**.

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<sup>2</sup> At the time of development of this paper - based on <https://www.ihfaf-forum.com/> accessed on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Website of the GFRS2024 accessed on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024: <https://gfrs.fssai.gov.in/2024/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://afraforum.org/> accessed on October 20<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

#### 1.4 The Caribbean Food Safety Taskforce

The Taskforce was created in 2019 and endorsed by the Ministerial Council of Trade and Development of countries of the Caribbean Community in 2022, with the aim to act as an advisory committee to food safety collaborations implemented by the Caribbean Health and Food Safety Agency. The concept of this group was also developed by the first author of this paper, as part of the implementation of the Suriname Agriculture Market Access Program, during the early years of its implementation. This Taskforce was kicked off with a meeting gathering food regulators from the region from the 23-25 July 2019.

#### 1.5 The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Food Safety Cooperation Forum<sup>5</sup>

A forum of food safety regulators gathering food regulators from the APEC region to develop robust food safety systems in the Asia-Pacific region, co-chaired by Australia (FSANZ) and China.

As part of this work, FSANZ in collaboration with food safety regulatory authorities and APEC food industry organizations has developed an **APEC Food Safety Risk Communication Framework and Associated Guidelines** after 2 years of intensive project work.

Similar initiatives were developed in the **Arab region**:

#### 1.6 The Arab Taskforce on Food Safety

The Taskforce was created as part of the Arab Food Safety Initiative for Trade Facilitation, a project implemented by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization through funding from the Swedish International Development Agency and with the partnership of the League of Arab States and its Subsidiary Bodies.

The Arab Taskforce on Food Safety has evolved to be a standing committee reporting to the Economic and Social Council of the League of Arab States along with the Arab SPS Coordination Committee, created by the same initiative.

#### 1.7 The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Food Safety Committee

The GCC Food Safety Committee is a regional body established amongst countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, to enhance food safety across the member states. Its primary goals include harmonizing food safety policies, regulations and standards, addressing potential hazards and developing strategies to mitigate them, capacity building and information sharing.

#### 1.8 Technical Committee <sup>5</sup>

Countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), a subgroup of the Arab region is also known to have a structured and on-going food safety cooperation mechanisms, including **Technical Committee 5** of the Gulf Cooperation Council Standardization Organization (GSO) in charge of food and agriculture and the food safety committee reporting to the secretary general of the Council.

#### 1.9 Practical Food Regulatory Cooperation Networks

Food Regulators identified the need to develop practical food regulatory cooperation mechanisms that serve the deployment of food regulatory functions. A leading experience worth noting is represented by the creation of what is now known as food regulatory cooperation “Liaison Groups”.

These structures were initiated in 2005 at the instigation of Canadian food regulators (Health Canada’s Food Directorate and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency), with other like-minded jurisdictions, such as regulators of the United States of America (the United States Food and Drug

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.foodstandards.gov.au/science-data/international/apec> accessed on October 20th, 2024.

Administration and the United States Department of Agriculture), of the European Union (the European Food Safety Authority and the European Commission), of France (the French Agency for Food, Environmental and Occupational Health & Safety), the United Kingdom (Food Standards Agency), of Japan (the Food Safety Commission of Japan and the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare) and of Australia / New-Zealand (represented by the bi-national authority of FSANZ and Ministry for Primary Industries New-Zealand).

These networks tend to be made of senior regulators in charge of the relevant food regulatory field and meet on a regular basis, develop and discuss practical aspects of collaboration between these jurisdictions, including exchanging priorities, and views on on-going initiatives<sup>6</sup>.

These forums have been instrumental to support member regulators in addressing emerging issues, such as the international Melamine incident in 2008 and more recently the engagement in Codex Proceedings with respect to food labelling (by the International Social Sciences Liaison Group)<sup>7</sup>.

Functioning as informal networks, these structures enabled the development of work-sharing opportunities that were translated in practical application leading to tangible outputs i.e., actual collaborative projects serving the interests of the regulators involved.

The networks created since 2005 include:

- The International Chemical Liaison Group (IFCSLG),
- The International Microbial Safety Liaison Group (IFMSLG),
- The International Social Science Liaison Group (ISCLG),
- The International Regulatory Economics Working Group

Upon reviewing the structure and mechanism for food regulatory cooperation available to food competent authorities in the Arab region, it appears that these structures, while supportive of the governance of the regional (Arab) institutions aiming for political and economic integration, tend to have heavy agendas dictated by the objectives of the integration mechanism(s) under which they were developed. This makes them insufficient or unsuitable to foster technical collaboration enabling experience-sharing opportunities or the development of joint capacities to address emerging issues in food safety, food quality and nutrition.

As such, there is a need to develop a forum that enables practical food regulatory cooperation between Arab Food Regulators.

## **2. Rationale for the Creation of the Arab Food Regulators' Network (AFoRNet) and its Objectives**

An additional food regulatory cooperation mechanism in the Arab region is essential, recognizing the need to develop effective and practical collaboration mechanisms between food regulators in the Arab region, and building on the experience of other regulatory bodies around the world, such as the creation of the various International Food Liaison Groups. It is recommended to create a **Network** made of Arab Food Competent Authorities interested in creating and sustaining a collaborative framework supporting their mandate with the aim to:

- ❖ Enable regular Engagement, with updates on priorities, future directions and emerging issues, including through established knowledge sharing platforms

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<sup>6</sup> Samuel Benrejeb Godefroy, Personal Experience as a member and co-founder of the International Food Chemical Safety Liaison Group (IFCSLG), as part of the author's responsibility as Director of Food Chemical Safety of the Food Directorate of Health Canada between 2004 and 2009 then as Director General of the Food Directorate (2009-2015).

<sup>7</sup> Example of Contribution of the International Social Science Liaison Group (ISSLG) in Codex Proceedings (ISSLG)

- ❖ Coordinate efforts to address emerging issues as needed,
- ❖ Develop joint initiatives and work-sharing opportunities, to minimize costs and leverage resources,
- ❖ **Support harmonization in food regulatory decisions, where possible amongst food competent authorities of the Arab region**
- ❖ Develop new opportunities for partnerships including joint efforts of fund-raising to support food safety and food quality regulatory management in the Arab region,
- ❖ Share resources in competency development and capacity building, with emphasis on food risk analysis
- ❖ Liaise and strengthen existing formal mechanisms of collaboration at the regional and sub-regional level.

This proposal is developed at the initiative of Oman's Food Safety and Quality Centre (FSQC) and the NFSA. The proposed Network is recommended to be identified as the **Arab Food Regulators' Network or AFoRNet**. Additionally, it is proposed that membership be open to **all food competent authorities** of the Arab region, that share the same vision and objectives of cooperation.

#### **Proposed Membership:**

- ❖ All Food Competent Authorities of **countries of the League of Arab states**. Within each country, a lead competent authority will be identified – based on the food regulatory competency in the country:
- ❖ *One Focal point in Each Country - the Lead Competent Authority*
  - *Where authorities have similar mandates e.g., two complementary ministries – they would share the focal point alternating*
  - *Internal management within a Given country is left to the country Competent Authorities*
  - *The Network will share information with all competent authorities enrolled, but will coordinate only with the focal point competent authority*
  - *It will be the responsibility of the focal point competent authority to coordinate and support the participation of other Competent authorities in their country as they deem relevant.*

#### **Proposed Governance Structure**

AFoRNet would be supported by a governance structure in the form of a **Steering Committee** initially, composed of NFSA and FSQC, as well as other interested food regulators from the region. A Maximum of xxx Competent Authorities / countries will be represented in the Steering Committee.

#### **Operations of the Network**

The operation of the Network may be supported by the Global Food Regulatory Science Society (GForSS), who would provide secretarial and management support where possible, considering the mandate's alignment with the organization's objectives to promote the development of food regulatory science networks regionally and globally. As such, the Network will also benefit from the implementation of several programs being carried out in the region, with the active involvement of the same regulatory bodies, ensuring that all efforts are leveraged and synergies enabled between such initiatives where possible.

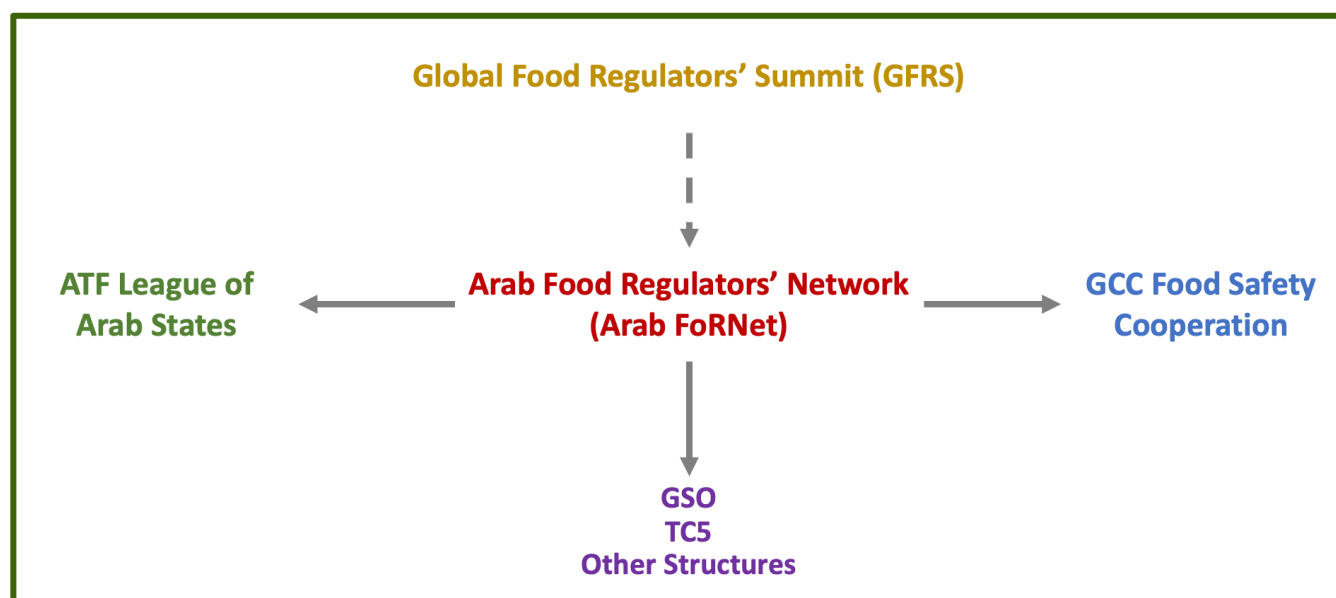
#### □ Funding:

- Each competent authority would fund its participation or part of activities in the Network
- Where relevant funding will be sought through capacity building initiatives administered by GForSS

### 3. Proposed Modus Operandi for AFoRNet and Proposed Initiatives

Beyond the adoption of a clear and workable governance structure in the form of a **Steering Committee**, the Network will strive to create **Expert Working Groups** that report to this Committee and are tasked to support the implementation of targeted and clearly defined initiatives. Should it become necessary for any of these Expert Working Groups to be an on-going structure, further support and adoption by the Steering Committee would be mandatory.

The Steering Committee, speaking on behalf of the Network, will strive to ensure that AFoRNET is an active and constructive contributor to the food safety collaborative mechanisms developed within the region, such as collaboration and engagement with the League of Arab States, including its subsidiary bodies and in particular, the Arab Industrial Development, Standardization and Mining Organization, the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development and the GSO (Figure 2).



**Figure 2: Proposed Engagement of AFoRNet with other Arab and International Food Regulatory Cooperation Structures**

As part of managing its operations, the Network will adopt the same values shared by various food regulatory bodies internationally, i.e. values in line with those of the Codex Alimentarius Commission, namely **Transparency, Collaboration and Independence**.

In planning and implementing its initiatives, AFoRNet will strive to avoid duplication of projects or activities being carried out through other programs under way in the region, rather to ensure their success and to leverage their resources, where possible to ensure optimal results.

AFoRNet will also serve as a mechanism to develop and sustain mechanisms of collaboration and engagement with other food regulatory partners and stakeholders. As an example, it is recommended that AFoRNet anchor as a sub-group of the GFRS, described above, with the opportunity to formalize such grouping in collaboration with FSSAI and the Government of India.



It is also recommended that AFoRNet establish and organize collaborations with other stakeholders, such as the structure of an engagement forum with food industry operating in the Arab region, as well as Academic Institutions and consumer/health professional organizations.

The creation of AFoRNet would offer a catalyst to existing and developing food regulatory cooperation mechanisms in the Arab region. Example of initiatives that can be further supported by the network may include:

- ❖ Import MRLs for Pesticide Residues that are not registered in several Arab Jurisdiction and with no Codex MRLs
- ❖ Management of Food Additives : Common response to changes in food regulatory provisions related to food additives, as a result of other jurisdictions' interventions to:
- ❖ Prevent undue disturbance to the Stream of Commerce
- ❖ Have a common / Shared risk communication approach where required
- ❖ Development of Arab Food Monitoring Initiatives enabling the comparison of current approaches in risk-based food monitoring, the development of best practices and the provision of advice on methodology for adoption by food regulators in designing and deploying such food monitoring efforts.
- ❖ Coordination of capacity building efforts to enable the availability of risk assessment competencies in the Arab Region, for example: coordinated training and competency benchmarking, leveraging resources and work-sharing for key areas of risk assessment.
- ❖ Development / refinement of common Environmental Scanning tools to identify emerging issues and develop mechanisms for collaborative interventions to address them.
- ❖ Specific and targeted collaborative initiatives to address select priority food hazards, such as the Arab Gluten Free Food and Allergen Management Initiative which aims to review current approaches to manage foods destined to celiac and food allergic individuals, combining efforts of data collection, awareness raising and advisory capacity to stakeholders.

#### 4. Conclusion and Proposed Next Steps

AFoRNet aspires to create synergies between food regulatory programs in the Arab region to enable strengthened engagement between food regulators of the region and to support their joint efforts. It is meant to be **a voluntary program** whose value and relevance to participating food regulators from the region will be the only parameter of measuring its success and supporting its sustainability.