



MEKONG  
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# WHY FOOD SAFETY MATTERS



Under the PROSAFE\* project, Mekong Institute (MI), with support from the New Zealand Aid Programme, has been strengthening food safety knowledge and expertise of agri-food stakeholders across Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, and Vietnam (CLMV) to help them better meet growing safe food demands, protect public health, and improve market competitiveness. The project has also been expanding public-private linkages to help establish integrated food safety control mechanisms, which seek to enhance food safety measures in the domestic and international food supply chains.

As we celebrate the World Food Safety Day, we place a spotlight on MI's Director for Agricultural Development and Commercialization, Ms. Maria Theresa S. Medialdia, who has been leading PROSAFE in CLMV since 2016, to explain the value and benefits of instilling a food safety culture in the subregion.

## Why is food safety important?

Access to safe food is a basic human right. Safe food is an important component of realizing food security in the subregion. Unsafe food is both a public health and a socioeconomic burden. The World Bank report on Food Safety Imperatives underscores that people from low- and middle-income countries spend a significant portion of their limited income on treatments for foodborne illnesses. These countries also lose out on trade opportunities due to high food safety incidents. Children who are malnourished are among the most vulnerable to unsafe food in Southeast Asia, which includes CLMV.

## How does food safety contribute to the regional and national economy?

Safe food handling and compliance with international food safety standards increase trust among the general public and trading partners on the integrity of the food supply chain of a country. This increases demand and, consequently, the income of smallholder farmers and small- and medium-sized agri-food entrepreneurs. In adhering to food safety benchmarks, they will be able to build their customer base and expand market access, thus contributing to job creation and economic growth.

## What is the status of food safety in CLMV?

Cognizant that the agri-food sector is the engine of economic growth and an entry point to deeper integration in CLMV, policymakers and the public sector have invested significantly in strengthening their food safety control systems. They have been reforming food safety laws, enacting regulations, developing standards and guidelines, and are actively involved in regional and international food safety initiatives. Under PROSAFE alone, our food safety champions have developed guidelines and systems on food traceability, as well as built better food production and safe packing facilities.

We do, however, need to scale up efforts to increase public awareness on the importance of safer food to broaden involvement and ownership of more stakeholders, particularly the private sector, to further institutionalize a food safety culture.

## What can be done to further instill a safe food culture?

Building and instilling a safe food culture is everyone's responsibility. It will require a solid foundation of programs, procedures, and policies, as well as time. Government, the business community, the private sector, academe, and all sectors will need to ensure that laws are developed, enforced, and followed to safeguard public health and facilitate agri-food trade. These can range from deploying early education initiatives on hygiene and sanitation practices; increased investments on public safe food facilities; and established systems and adherence to operational and environmental conditions such as Good Manufacturing Practices, Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point, among others.

In due course, these will inculcate a culture of food safety, which then translates to a safer and progressive environment for all of us.

## How can everyone be involved?

Be the change you want to see. Practice and spread the word on the importance of safe food for our health and well-being. More than any other place in the world, our subregion offers unique and diverse agri-food products. In making these safe, future generations are set to experience better choices of food that benefit their well-being and increase their productivity.

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