

Moving Towards Global Recognition of Quality Assurance Systems for ASEAN Fruits and Vegetables

Introduction

The rising demand for safe quality fruit and vegetables has meant that Quality Assurance (QA) systems based on Good Agricultural Practices (GAP) must be in place to satisfy domestic consumption and capturing new markets in the global economy. In addition to food safety, international requirements could also include the environmental sustainability, produce quality, and workers' health and safety.

Many ASEAN Member States (AMSs) have taken the initiative and developed country-specific GAP based QA systems primarily to satisfy the export market which are suitable to the local conditions and for their farmers to use. ASEAN introduced the ASEAN Good Agricultural Practice standard (ASEAN GAP) and published the "Good Agricultural Practices for the Production of Fresh Fruits and Vegetables for the ASEAN Region" in 2006 to assist with the standardisation of fruit and vegetable GAP across the region. A harmonised GAP standard would mean easier trading between AMSs when the economic integration starts in 2015 as well as improve viability for farmers and help sustain a safe food supply. The most important standard that ASEAN GAP covers relates to food safety, wherein the alignment of the national standards has now become mandatory for the facilitation of free flow of goods and the enhancement of ASEAN competitiveness of agricultural products in the global market. Following the development of the standards, their adoption and the creation of the Strategic Plan, various activities have been carried out by the AMSs although at different levels and degrees corresponding to the commitment of the governments, availability of financial resources and knowledge of technical experts.

Results

To support the progress of the earlier initiatives, the project "Global Recognition of Quality Assurance Systems for ASEAN Fruits and Vegetables (ASEAN GAP)" was implemented by the ASEAN Secretariat with the AMSs in 2012 with a focus on the full implementation and utilization of the ASEAN GAP. Moving ASEAN GAP forward is considered a priority as it will benefit all stakeholders in ASEAN ranging from consumers through safe food, farmers with increased markets for their products, countries with increased regional and international trade and most importantly a certification system and accreditation system that has an equal footing across all AMS to give each country the same opportunity to export regionally and internationally.

The first year of the project focused towards assessing the needs of the Member States in fulfilling their commitments as per provisions of the Strategic Plan, and coming up with recommendations on how identified gaps and needs can be addressed. It became apparent that some aspects of the ASEAN GAP require further work before the integration of ASEAN trading starts in 2015. Most countries in the ASEAN region now have fully functioning GAP QA systems in place, however some countries are lagging behind and not all countries have a standardised system in place yet. There is a need to develop a road map for the future management of the ASEAN GAP standard across all countries

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including a common auditing and recognition process.

The ASEAN GAP Operational Plan covering the period of 2013-2016 has been developed and agreed in 2014 covers the following:

- The acceleration of implementation of GAP programs in AMSs
- The development of ASEAN GAP recognition mechanism and certification system
- The strengthening in the alignment of national GAP with ASEAN GAP
- Enhancing awareness of ASEAN GAP with involvement of the private sector, civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on ASEAN GAP implementation

Policy recommendations

The reality is that the 10 Member States are in the process of implementing food safety GAP's aligned with ASEAN GAP with different rates of success. It would be impossible to address each Member State weaknesses or strengths to induce and enhance implementation of ASEAN GAP. There are, however, a number of recommendations that can be made to enhance the uptake across all Member States.

The success of ASEAN economic integration depends on the involvement of the Member States in the integration process. The AMSs should be actively involved in the work required to standardise GAP as a means to support trade facilitation via the actions points outlined below:

- Accelerate the implementation of GAP programs in all Member States. This action is particularly important to those Member States that do not have a fully functioning GAP QA system in place through:
 - Enacting the GAP related regulations for fresh fruits and vegetables
 - Establishing a body that will oversee the development of specific national action programs
 - Conducting information, education and communication campaigns to generate awareness of GAP
- Support the development and implementation of ASEAN GAP recognition mechanism and certification system by:
 - Assisting with the formulation of a common certification system
 - Establishing of ASEAN GAP accreditation committee and accreditation system
 - Establishing and /or strengthening testing laboratories that can support ASEAN GAP testing requirements
 - Establishing regional recognition mechanisms of individual ASEAN Member State accreditation body
- Strengthen alignment of national GAP with ASEAN GAP by reviewing how their national GAP could be further aligned with ASEAN GAP
 - Utilising a tracking progress tracking mechanism for the alignment and harmonization of the national GAP standard with the modules of the ASEAN GAP
 - Applying the ASEAN Guidelines for Determination of Equivalence of Systems (using also existing Codex Guidelines for Judgment of Equivalence)
- Enhance ASEAN GAP information, education and communication campaigns
 - Updating GAP training modules and institutionalising them on appropriate training centers or academic institutions to provide training for agricultural personnel and farmers
 - Developing programs to socialise and encourage the uptake of ASEAN GAP by involving the private sector, civil societies organisations, non-governmental organisations, consumer bodies on ASEAN GAP implementation
 - Establishing and promoting the use of GAP/ASEAN GAP brand