Bhutan is a small landlocked country in South Asia with a population of a little over 770,0001.

It is a country with ‘Gross National Happiness’ at the heart of its government and a commitment to pursue the Sustainable Development Goals. Food safety is a crucial factor in achieving these pursuits, and Kubir N. Bhattarai, the Deputy Chief Food Safety Officer in Bhutan’s Agriculture and Food Regulatory Authority is determined to ensure food safety problems do not hold the country back. “We struggle in this country,” says Bhattarai, “with limited understanding of food safety issues among policy makers, decision makers, food business operators, government stakeholders and consumers” and he adds that weak food systems, testing capacity and awareness also can make Bhutan an easy “dumping ground” for other countries and traders to offload substandard food.

1 https://population.un.org/wpp
HOW CAN CTF HELP?

Bhutan’s membership of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) can play a large part in addressing these concerns. The CAC is the joint FAO/WHO food standard-setting body where 188 Member Countries and one Member Organization develop guidelines, standards and codes of practice that ensure safe food and fair practices in the food trade. Part of Bhattarai’s job is to coordinate Bhutan’s Codex activities, which are often frustrated by a limited understanding of food safety among decision makers and by the nature of food-related industries in the country, most of which are small-scale, with little ability or knowhow to establish their own quality assurance systems.

However, things are changing with the US$ 464 120 project developed by Bhutan and neighbouring India and Nepal, that secured support from the Codex Trust Fund (CTF) in early 2019. CTF was established in 2003 by the CAC to help developing and transition economy countries build their capacity to participate in Codex Alimentarius and this is the CTF’s first group project.

WORKING AS A TEAM

“We needed to strengthen Nepal’s national Codex structures and promote subregional cooperation,” says Mohan Krishna Maharjan, from Nepal’s Department of Food Technology and Quality Control. Subregional cooperation was a motivating factor also for India, according to their Codex Contact Point, Sunil Bakshi. “By working together, we could benefit mutually from the project, learn from each other’s experiences and find ways for sustainable cooperation in terms of overall food safety,” explains Bakshi. “These were the key considerations for applying as a group.” India is by far the biggest partner of the three and also the more experienced when it comes to food standards. In the past, the country has banned ginger, tea and other imports from both Nepal and Bhutan, because of quality failures. But this CTF project will help develop a trusting relationship between these countries with the aim of harmonizing standards to ease trade across all respective borders.
GROUP ADVANTAGES

Activities carried out under this project include awareness workshops and technical training for a variety of food safety stakeholders and for Codex team members. Working together on these activities has enabled increased cooperation and confidence building, which have already resulted in Indian agreements with both Nepal and Bhutan that recognize each other’s food safety laboratories. An agreement is now in place to also increase Bhutan’s food safety laboratory capacity. Maharjan points out that Codex teams in each country will improve their understanding of Codex through this project and this will also enable the teams to work collectively at the CAC in the interests of the subregion as a whole.

THE IMPORTANCE OF TRAINING

Other project activities included multi-country training on, for example, “a chemical risk analysis framework for food safety,” which was conducted in India and involved participants from all three countries. According to Bakshi, this was a success, both in terms of participation and expected outcomes. Professionals from all three countries were trained, through the contribution of experts from Canada, Germany and Hong Kong. “The workshop has laid a foundation of enhanced understanding of risk analysis among the participants,” says Bakshi, “and they will play a potential role as master trainers to conduct more training programmes in the future.”

For Maharjan, it was the training received by Codex team members that stood out. Mock practice sessions and ‘hands-on experience with Codex web tools’ allowed Codex teams to return to their countries armed with new knowledge to review national Codex procedural manuals. Now, members could attend international Codex meetings with a confidence many had not previously felt. For Bhattarai, it was also training
that improved his team’s participation, particularly in the Codex Committee on Food Import and Export Inspection and Certification Systems (CCFICS). The food inspection and certification workshop in Bhutan helped to improve Codex Bhutan’s understanding of and participation in CCFICS. Now, the country knows how to start building an inspection system that will keep substandard food out of the country.

THE PANDEMIC FORCES A RETHINK

Everyone was aware that a three-country project would be demanding. After one year of the three-year implementation, the teams had come up against challenges coordinating participants across three countries and in establishing timelines. Then, of course, the pandemic struck. Few countries, projects or plans have escaped the mayhem that was wrought by COVID-19. The first ever CTF group project was no different.

“There were challenges, but we managed to face them together,” says Dr Gyanendra Gongal, Regional Advisor on Food Safety from the WHO Regional Office for South-East Asia. “Definitely, COVID-19 has impacted the CTF programme but we will find a way out.”

“In the current time of the pandemic, new ways will need to be explored to continue the implementation of the project,” says Bakshi, “specifically when it comes to group activities.” Other CTF applicants are now watching the group’s response to see what might work in the future.

In the meantime, the project leaders have some advice for countries hoping to apply for a group CTF project. “Do it!!” they say. Maharjan is convinced this is a great way to strengthen common regional interests. But some lessons learned include the need to identify weaknesses in national Codex structures and to find the solutions that will strengthen them. It is also wise to discuss identified weaknesses with interested countries and to determine common problems. Making good use of the diagnostic tool also proved to be important. “That was a real eye opener for Bhutan,” says Bhattarai. “And it really helped.”

To conclude, his words of advice are: “And if at first you do not succeed – listen to the FAO and WHO experts and try again!”