Ghana has been a member of the Codex Alimentarius Commission (CAC) for over half a century and has twice assumed the role of regional coordinator of CCAFRICA, the Codex Committee for Africa. Throughout its membership, delegates for Ghana have advocated for FAO and WHO to “consider ways and means of lending more practical assistance to the special needs of Africa to develop sound basic food legislation and food standards” (CAC7 report, 1970). Such campaigning contributed to the formation of the Codex Trust Fund (CTF) in 2003.

“Codex Ghana has always been active in CAC,” says Andrew Lartey, Ghana’s Codex Contact Point, “but our contribution was mostly based on scientific studies from other countries. We had the laboratories and the human resources to generate scientific data but lacked capacity in carrying out certain parameters.” It is data that forms the scientific basis of Codex standards, and countries that can contribute data are more able to participate in Codex standard setting, to the benefit of their own country as well as CAC as a whole. These were the kinds of “special needs” with which Ghana had been asking for assistance.

IDENTIFYING THE CHALLENGES

An application to the CTF involves use of a “diagnostic tool”, where priority weaknesses can be identified, and, from there, solutions developed. It was by using this tool that Codex Ghana decided to target data collection and analysis of methylmercury in tuna fish and inorganic arsenic in rice as the two key foci of
their proposed CTF project. “The problem was that we did not have the capacity to analyse methylmercury even though our laboratories could analyse mercury,” Lartey explains. “We also analysed arsenic but not inorganic arsenic and had no data to contribute toward setting maximum limits in rice.” Both tuna fish and rice are important staples of the Ghanaian diet. Tuna fish is also a valuable export for the country, and once it enters international trade, it is subject to international, Codex-based standards. So, it is in Ghana’s interest to be able to contribute to those standards. “Without effective participation in the work of Codex,” says Lartey, “countries are at risk of losing out on international trade and thereby losing revenue.”

In the meantime, two consultants from India were contacted to help build capacity at the Metallic Contaminants Laboratory of the Ghana Standards Authority (GSA). The consultants trained scientists at the laboratory to sample and test for methylmercury and inorganic arsenic. “The training was successfully organized” says Lartey, “and the laboratory is now fully equipped to analyse fish and rice samples for methylmercury and inorganic arsenic respectively.” However, there were some challenges that emerged during the project. “Due to the high toxicity of methylmercury, our search for consultants to assist in the capacity building was a bit difficult,” Lartey admits, further explaining that only a few laboratories can test food products for methylmercury. This wasn’t the only challenge the team had to face, as one key piece of equipment, an atomic absorption spectrophotometer, frequently broke down. The training was postponed a number of times due to this equipment failure. “This was a very big challenge for us,” Lartey explains, “but the Indian consultants were very cooperative with us and training was finally scheduled as soon as the equipment was fixed.”

GETTING THE MESSAGE ACROSS

The CTF project was approved in 2016 and set about not only improving capacity in data collection and analysis of these important contaminants, but also in addressing gaps in food safety knowledge throughout the fish and rice food chains and within the general public. “These are issues that mustn’t be toyed with,” says Dr Kofi Amponsah-Bediako, Director of Corporate Communications at the GSA. “Farmers and food processors need to be made aware of the dangers involved
so as to be able to prevent them from affecting consumers – both at home and in the export market.” It was decided that the way to inform these different actors was to ensure journalists were trained not only in the importance of raising awareness about food safety generally, but also to ensure the accuracy of what they were saying. “After all,” continues Dr Amponsah-Bediako, “if journalists did not understand the importance of food safety, it would be difficult for the public to appreciate the issue.”

“Before the CTF project, a lot of research and knowledge was available to the Codex unit at the GSA,” Dr Amponsah-Bediako explains. “The problem, however, was the dissemination of relevant information to the relevant people - and also that journalists would just relay what they thought to be the facts.” He trained a number of journalists on food safety. The journalists considered him credible and engaged well with the programme once they recognized him as both an expert in the field of communication and as someone with a background in food safety. “Once I had trained the journalists, they were able to report better on issues relating to food safety” says Dr Amponsah-Bediako, “which made it easy for the public to appreciate its importance.”
Codex Ghana identified a weakness in the country’s food safety and attacked it from different angles, including scientific and general awareness. According to Dr Amponsah-Bediako, the approach has been successful: “I have been able to influence the media to report more accurately on food safety” he says, “and at the same time, it is clear from food safety discussions that national experts from all over the country feel they are now equipped with knowledge about Codex.” His information brochures have also had an impact with policymakers, the food industry and the general public.

**IMPACT**

Lartey has also seen significant material progress on the hard science: “A lot of credible data has now been generated on the levels of methylmercury in fish, as well as inorganic arsenic in husked rice,” which is a very satisfactory outcome. This has made an impact on Ghana’s ability to determine the safety of its own fish and rice. “The CTF gives developing countries the opportunity to resolve problems or weaknesses in their own countries that also hinder their contribution to the work of Codex,” states Lartey. “Those that are considering an application should assess their strengths and weaknesses to identify the issues that need solving. CTF is a good opportunity for them,” he says.