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**EXPERIENCES IN APPLICATION OF HACCP SYSTEMS
IN SMALL AND MEDIUM SIZED BUSINESSES IN HUNGARY**

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A model scheme was developed to promote the widespread application of HACCP systems in accordance with principles of Good Hygienic Practice in SME companies. The scheme was organised by industrial Research and Development (R+D) personnel with support from the Hungarian Ministry of Agriculture and Regional Development (MARD). The scope covered products of plant origin, preserved foods and catering.

The principle objective was to develop HACCP models for subsequent implementation as practical systems in food businesses within particular sub- sectors, and also to:

- generate industrial awareness
- assure participation of industry in the: development of the models; discussion of legal frameworks; and understanding of industrial self regulation.
- reduce complexity and cost of system development.
- promote ownership, and sustained operation of the systems by the companies involved.

Under the technical leadership of an R+D organisation, a steering committee was formed to, establish objectives, review progress, solve problems and provide recommendations for government. Official participation included experts from: the Food Industry, Veterinary Health and Food Control, departments of MARD, Ministry of Health, Ministry of Economy, the Technical Development Agency, the relevant trade associations of EFOSZ (Hungarian Federation of Food Manufacturers), and the Product Council for Fruits and Vegetables.

Creating awareness

To create awareness in the model scheme an initial seminar, including presentations by EU experts, was organised for 140 key representatives of industry and food control authorities. Sector specific seminars and presentations at appropriate publicity events were subsequently organised with the trade associations and EFOSZ to promote the importance of food safety management and the benefits of the scheme. Introductory seminars were provided at each project milestone.

Training system

For industrial participants, 3-day HACCP workshops were organised including the principles and benefits of HACCP systems, GHP, and case study exercises requiring the development of documented HACCP plans. For food control officers the group exercises focussed especially on typical failures and verification methods. Specific versions were developed for agriculture and catering.

Short (2 hour) courses for senior factory managers explained the basis for food safety management and the principles and benefits and implementation of HACCP. Short courses for operators emphasised typical hazards, their importance within the system, the consequences of failure and record keeping.

Development of HACCP plans

At very small businesses, group training on the development of sector specific hazard libraries and generic HACCP models modified for individual businesses provided for successful HACCP implementation. Forms provided assistance in system documentation and record keeping. Implementation of GHP's and priorities for improvement were discussed with local teams.

The standard approach included initial validation and verification of the HACCP system as a training exercise.

Development of sector specific Good Hygiene Practice codes

In Central and Eastern Europe, food safety regulations were historically prescriptive and left little flexibility for industry to build best practice into food safety management systems. The concept of self regulation by industry was not developed. There was a need for reference books providing benchmarks on industrial standards and how they might be practically achieved.

In Hungary the first general GMP guide was developed by a multidisciplinary working party in 1996. A template for GHP codes followed and led to the GHP codes for Canning and Baking. An EU project (BSP-2), administered by CIAA (Confederation of Food and Drink Industries of the EU), and with technical leadership from Campden & Chorleywood Hungary, and with support from EFOSZ, provided funding for the development of five further codes, for flour milling, fruit juice, confectionery, dry pasta and pickles. Codes for chilled prepared fruits and vegetables, and for frozen foods are in preparation. This latter code involves co-operation between the Hungarian working party and the Czech and Polish Federations.

Handbooks, guidelines

Technical guidelines were produced providing advice for SME's at minimal cost. They include Hungarian translations of standard HACCP texts such as CCFRA's "HACCP, A Practical Guide", simple cartoon books for operators, and GHP guides relating to specific subjects such as, Identification and Prevention of Foreign Body Contamination, Water Hygiene, Hygienic Building Design, and a code for Assured Vegetables.

Technical support

Specific support was provided in relation to, the prevention of foreign body contamination, heat treatment validation, cleaning and disinfection, rapid microbiological methods, specification review, and food legislation. SME's were advised on how to participate in official funding schemes aimed to improve factory hygiene.

Validation and verification services

An optional validation and verification service was established for those companies, needing external support for regular review of their HACCP plan.

Publicity

A publicity plan was implemented to disseminate the results of the project through industrial seminars, participation in international food exhibitions, conferences and the production of leaflets. Press conferences and media interviews were organised and lists of scheme participants were made available to the major buying organisations

Education

Undergraduate courses and textbooks on Food Safety and Quality were developed for two universities.

Government support

The scheme was a voluntary initiative, not based on government support but which aimed to attract funding through public application and from industry.

Government helped however in the development of implementation strategy and a public funding scheme opened by MARD enabled food organisations to obtain up to 50% of costs for the development of HACCP plans.

The development of GHP and other technical guides, and the major seminars, were funded either by international support (mainly EU) or by the government (mainly MARD).

The rapid implementation of HACCP was helped by the timely development of legislation, in consultation with industry, and which introduced mandatory obligation, albeit with a period of transition.

Industrial experts provided significant help in the overall training of the food control authorities.

Results

Since 1997 over 410 food businesses participated in the model scheme and some 3000 individuals have received training. The progress of the scheme and available support encouraged general implementation of HACCP in Hungary. By the end of 2001 the majority of food business had some level of HACCP system. Many people, trained within the model scheme, started to provide help for other businesses in their own sector.

Lessons learned

The campaign for creating awareness in Industry was central to the success of the programme. EFOSZ and sector trade associations were key in representing industry in the development of strategy, awareness, generic HACCP plans and sector specific GHP codes, for providing industrial representation in discussions on legislation and in dissemination of results.

The generic HACCP models and GHP codes helped to reduce the time and costs of system development. It was learned however that publication of a full generic model is not always advisable as certain companies and consultants may have temptation to use this without the necessary adaptation for local conditions. Published material therefore included only typical CCP's, control and monitoring activities, critical limits and corrective actions.

Implementation highlighted the importance of the full chain approach to food safety. Certain hazards can only be controlled during agriculture and the safety of products may be compromised by bad practices during distribution.

Government support for the development of HACCP plans had greater impact than simple financial value. It motivated food businesses to invest their own money and time, which in total value may greatly exceed that of government funding. Official funding was vital however in developing the GHP codes and technical guides, as industry was insufficiently ready to fund such activities.

The attractiveness of the project to industry was greatly assisted by the imminence of European accession; the availability of technical support to identify needs for investment in food hygiene and in the selection of feasible solutions; and help in the development of applications for funding.

Finally the planned dissemination of results helped multiply the wide-scale application of HACCP systems.