




PILOTING THE USE OF VOLUNTARY THIRD-PARTY ASSURANCE (vTPA) PROGRAMMES: Lessons from STDF Projects in Africa and Central America



vTPA PROGRAMMES: AN INNOVATIVE APPROACH TO MODERNIZE NATIONAL FOOD SAFETY SYSTEMS

Voluntary Third-Party Assurance (vTPA) programmes offer an approach to strengthen food safety outcomes, based on risk-based approaches and public-private collaboration. They comprise formal and documented food safety and quality systems, developed and administered by the private sector, to ensure compliance with specified standards. These programmes, often covering primary production and food manufacturing, are not required by national laws or regulations. They are used voluntarily by food businesses to ensure the safety of their products. Data generated by vTPA programmes can have substantial positive impacts on regulatory efficiency, while helping to reduce regulatory burden and costs, and improve food safety outcomes.

With the increased use of vTPA programmes for food safety and quality, food safety authorities in some countries (including Canada, Germany, the Netherlands and the UK) identified opportunities to use reliable data generated by vTPA programmes to help strengthen their national food control systems. For instance, to inform their risk profiling of Food Business Operators (FBOs), support risk-based inspections and more effectively target resources within their national food control systems. Over the last few decades, these authorities sought closer collaboration with the private sector to take advantage of win-win opportunities, based on the use of vTPA programmes, to improve food safety outcomes recognizing food safety and quality as their shared goal.

Based on these experiences – and in parallel with work by Codex to develop Principles and Guidelines for vTPA programmes – food safety regulatory authorities in some developing countries were keen to explore how they might use vTPA programmes to move towards a more risk-based food control

system. Yet, they had practical questions about the approach and how it could work given their particular contexts and legal frameworks for their food control systems. Some also had concerns about accountability, regulatory capture, transparency and costs especially for micro, small and medium sized enterprises (MSMEs).



Codex Principles and Guidelines for National Food Control Systems

The Codex Committee on Food Import-Export Inspection and Certification Systems (CCFICS) defines a vTPA programme as "a non-governmental or autonomous scheme comprising of the ownership of a standard that utilises national/international requirements; a governance structure for certification and enforcement, and in which Food-Business Operator (FBO) participation is voluntary".

In 2021, Codex adopted Principles and Guidelines to assist competent authorities in their consideration of vTPA programmes and illustrate how the use of reliable vTPA programmes may support delivery of national food control system objectives. The Guidelines outline a framework and criteria to assess the governance, integrity and reliability of data generated by these programmes to support the objectives of national food control system objectives. They recognize that while competent authorities may choose to establish arrangements with owners of vTPA programmes to use information and data generated by their programmes to support regulatory controls and objectives, this does not change the roles and responsibilities of public and private sector stakeholders.

STDF PILOT vTPA PROJECTS

The STDF supported three regional pilot projects in West Africa (Senegal and Mali), Central America (Honduras and Belize) and East Africa (Rwanda and Uganda) to test and learn how the vTPA approach can work in practice in different developing country contexts.

The pilots introduced a novel approach in regions where vTPA programmes have seen limited, if any, application, generating practical experiences and learnings to inform ongoing global discussions within Codex, the WTO Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Committee) and other Government to Government (G2G) and Government to Business (G2B) meetings.

Table 1 - Overview of the STDF Regional Pilot Projects

STDF Project	STDF/PG/665: Piloting the Use of Voluntary Third-Party Assurance Programmes (vTPA) in West Africa	STDF/PG/682: Piloting the Use of Voluntary Third-Party Assurance Programmes (vTPA) in Central America	STDF/PG/842: Piloting the use of Third-Party Assurance (vTPA) Programme in East Africa
Timeframe	Feb. 2020 - Sep. 2024	Oct. 2020 - Dec. 2024	Nov. 2022 – Oct. 2025
Countries	Mali, Senegal	Belize, Honduras	Rwanda, Uganda
Sectors	Mali & Senegal: Horticulture (mangoes)	Belize: all sectors Honduras: shrimp and fresh produce	Rwanda: Horticulture (chilli, French beans and avocado) Uganda: Fisheries
Implementing organization	United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)	Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture (IICA)	Land O'Lakes Venture 37 (V37)
Local partners	Mali: Agence Nationale de la Sécurité Sanitaire des Aliments (ANSSA) Senegal: National Codex Committee, Plant Protection Department (DPV)	Belize: Belize Agricultural Health Authority (BAHA) Honduras: National Service for Plant, Animal Health and Agri-food (SENASA)	Rwanda: Rwanda Inspectorate, Competition and Consumer Protection Authority (RICA) Uganda: Ministry of Agriculture, Animal, Industry and Fisheries – Directorate of Fisheries Resources

The project countries presented distinct national and regional contexts and varying levels of vTPA readiness, with higher levels of existing vTPA awareness and use in Honduras and Senegal, compared to East and West Africa. This generated valuable insights on applicability in diverse market conditions. Different value chains were selected in each country, which provided data on how vTPA can strengthen food safety outcomes across various industries. This provided an opportunity for increased learning and exchange of experiences, within and across different regions.

A common approach was adopted with components supporting capacity building for regulatory authorities and food business operators (FBOs), as well as broader dissemination and learning. The projects used a highly collaborative approach bringing together public and private stakeholders involved in food safety management at the country level, as well as diverse international and regional partners, including through the online vTPA Partnership Platform hosted by UNIDO. Lessons learned were actively shared and synergies leveraged between the projects throughout delivery to support South-South and North-South dialogue and learning.



KEY RESULTS

Strengthened risk-based inspection processes and updated food safety regulatory frameworks

The projects supported regulatory authorities in the countries involved to develop and/or improve risk-based approaches to food safety management. They showed how data generated by vTPA programmes can have positive impacts on regulatory efficiency, for instance to inform risk profiling, identify systemic issues and trends, reduce intensity or frequency of regulatory inspections and support smarter data-driven prioritization of resources. The experiences led to stronger public-private sector dialogue and cooperation, pointing to practical opportunities to modernize regulatory frameworks, reduce regulatory burden and costs, and improve food safety outcomes.

“These projects were one of a kind because they allowed us to pilot and validate the Codex vTPA guidelines in our developing country context. This supported our efforts to implement a risk-based approach to inspections, which ensures that scarce government resources are targeted to establishments and sectors of greatest risk.”

Mirian Bueno Almendarez, Technical Director of Food Safety, National Service for Agri-Food Health and Safety, Honduras

- Government authorities in Honduras and Senegal integrated the vTPA approach into their food safety legal frameworks. These countries are now exploring further infrastructure enhancements and digital solutions to automate risk-based inspection processes. In Senegal, national authorities were inspired to take steps and plan how to incorporate elements of the vTPA framework into the country's new phytosanitary law.
- While Belize and Mali are comparatively at earlier stages of vTPA readiness, the projects allowed their food safety authorities to take steps towards more risk-based food safety systems. The Belize Agricultural Health Authority (BAHA) developed and operationalized a risk-based inspection system. Authorities in Mali began consolidating information about food controls to inform their planning and operations, and started considering options to incorporate vTPA-related elements in their food safety plan.
- In Rwanda and Uganda, the project helped to update fisheries and plant health regulations, revised inspection procedures and produced national roadmaps outlining how vTPA data could inform risk-based inspection. Additionally, an automated risk-profiling system, inspired by Canada's risk-based model, was piloted to help authorities prioritize inspections based on risk.




Practical vTPA tools and roadmaps to achieve ongoing food safety improvements

The projects developed and piloted practical tools and roadmaps to support ongoing improvements in national food control systems and promote long-term sustainability after the end of the projects. These tools, based on practical experiences and aligned with Codex Guidelines, can also serve as a useful reference point and model for other regulatory authorities looking to adopt the vTPA approach, enabling wider scaling.

“Training on the use of the Codex vTPA Guidelines and learning from experiences elsewhere inspired RICA to modernize and reform food safety controls to better serve our communities and meet food safety objectives. We see the vTPA approach as a very useful tool for us.”

Antoinette Mbabazi, Acting Head of Registration, Licensing and Enforcement Department, Rwanda Inspectorate, Competition and Consumer Protection Authority (RICA), Rwanda

- UNIDO published the vTPA Programme Assessment Tool and vTPA Readiness Check following work carried out under the West Africa project. Engagement with the project stakeholders and other relevant public and private sector stakeholders ensured that the tools reflected practical experiences and needs.
- Competent authorities in Belize and Honduras were guided by these tools as they developed roadmaps to assess and/or make use of data generated by vTPA programmes as part of their national food control systems.
- In East Africa, the project stakeholders developed Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) for food inspections and an adapted assessment framework to guide data-driven planning of inspections and strengthen the long-term sustainability of risk-based practices.



Increased awareness and capacity in the public and private sector about innovative approaches to strengthen food safety systems for domestic food safety and trade

The projects established the foundations for vTPA adoption in the target countries through public-private dialogue and cooperation, as well as South-South and North-South exchange. Activities improved awareness about the complementary roles and responsibilities of public and private sector stakeholders and understanding of shared objectives, in spite of distinct roles. Exposure to different models and approaches, through mentoring, learning visits and dialogue at regional and global events, informed the development of country-specific approaches and roadmaps. For regulators, the projects increased confidence in private sector management systems and helped to profile businesses and sectors more accurately, freeing up resources and staff time to focus on less compliance sectors. For the food industry, the projects provided new knowledge to improve food safety systems, and led to more constructive relationships with regulators.

“ Food safety authorities cannot be behind every food business operator or enterprise on a daily basis. When food businesses implement voluntary food safety management systems to do things the right way, government authorities will be able to better allocate their resources for oversight and do their job better, and everybody wins.

Cheikh Ngane, President of the Senegalese Horticulturists' Federative Cooperative.

- Capacity development led to improved operational practices for food control management, including expanded dialogue and engagement between regulators and food businesses. For instance, in Senegal, the government has stronger and more systematic relationships with FBOs as part of its official food controls, which includes a new more structured schedule for inspections.
- Practical trainings of FBOs, including packing houses in Honduras and mango value chain actors in Senegal, enabled local industries to gain hands-on knowledge and skills about how to improve food safety.
- In East Africa, Training-of-Trainers sessions and Quality Assurance Manager courses created a cadre of practitioners capable of cascading knowledge to other public and private stakeholders. Simplified communication materials and field mentoring significantly broadened outreach. Global G.A.P. and good-practice requirements were translated into user-friendly brochures in English and local languages for small-scale producers. FBOs reported improved hygiene, documentation and handling practices, with the strongest gains among larger operators, contributing to reduced border rejections.



LESSONS LEARNED

The lessons learned from these regional projects have been shared widely, including with WTO SPS Committee and Codex delegates, to inform the possible adoption and use of vTPA approaches elsewhere.

- 1. Selecting the right countries and sectors is key:** Experience from across the pilots confirms that a preparatory needs assessment or feasibility study is important before implementing a vTPA pilot. Countries with a sufficient baseline level of awareness, organization and regulatory capacity are more likely to successfully adopt vTPA programmes. Existing risk-based inspection systems (e.g. in Honduras, Senegal) helped accelerate integration of the approach. Choosing a shared sector (e.g. mango in West Africa) enabled a targeted approach to training and roadmap development. However, this is not always feasible, and sector choice should be informed by vTPA readiness in the value chain. Experiences in Uganda showed how that rolling out the vTPA approach in the fisheries sector which included more established and advanced food businesses helped to promote and reinforce capacity improvements among newer aquaculture operators.

 - 2. Adaptation to local context is important:** Since capacity levels differed between the project countries, the amount and type of support, including studies and training, was carefully adapted to national needs. The combination of South-South exchanges, and exposure to different best practice models, provided useful frameworks and insights, which ultimately informed the development of country-specific vTPA approaches and roadmaps. These roadmaps were developed in consultation with local stakeholders and provided practical steps for vTPA implementation, reflecting local conditions including regulatory frameworks, industry practices and access to relevant food safety infrastructure and services.

 - 3. Introducing risk-based food safety management systems adds value even without development of national vTPA programmes:** Using data from private certification schemes within national food control systems is both achievable and relevant. Developing stand-alone national vTPA programmes is generally not feasible in the short term due to various accreditation and system-capacity constraints. In East Africa, the pilot focused on practical data use and risk profiling to improved performance, rather than building full national schemes.

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5. Knowledge networks play a key role in leveraging resources and promoting continued learning: The vTPA Partnership Platform, established and led by UNIDO, brought together diverse public and private sector partners to improve coordination and exchange good practices, which helped to leverage expertise and resources in support of the project's outcomes. This mechanism is further evolving to become part of a newly established community of practice centred on the UNIDO vTPA Benchmarking Initiative. Mentoring from more experienced countries, including Argentina, Canada, Colombia and the UK, helped to integrate best practices and foster cross-regional learning. In East Africa, the pilot created new local platforms for dialogue between fishers and processors, filling a gap and allowing for improved understanding of handling constraints and compliance requirements.

6. Integrating Gender Equality and Social Inclusion strengthens project impact: In West Africa, early incorporation of gender analysis, indicators and sensitization activities led to high female participation and enabled diverse perspectives and insights to be considered in efforts to improve food safety practices. Awareness building around inclusivity led some stakeholders to understand the benefits of private certification that includes social aspects. In East Africa, the pilot demonstrated that gender and social considerations are integral to compliance with food safety requirements. Gender-sensitive approaches in training increased attention about labour practices, workplace fairness and human-rights aspects of certification.



Lessons from STDF regional projects profiled at WTO SPS Committee Thematic Session

Experiences and lessons from the STDF regional pilot projects were shared during a Thematic Session on monitoring the use of international standards, organized by the WTO SPS Committee, on 12 November 2024 following a proposal by Belize related to the Sixth Review of the SPS Agreement.

Speakers from government authorities and other organizations directly involved in the regional projects in Africa and Central America shared their perspectives on the experiences, successes and challenges from STDF-supported projects, as well as the use of the UNIDO/STDF vTPA assessment tool. They also highlighted opportunities for capacity building and wider adoption in developing countries.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE vTPA PROJECT DEVELOPMENT AND IMPLEMENTATION IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

1. Future vTPA initiatives could have a broader remit, incorporating practical value-chain training, certification assistance (including financial) and regulatory policy guidance. For best results, such initiatives should target countries with existing vTPA awareness and sectors that are already using vTPA programmes.

2. To ensure sustainability, regulatory authorities in pilot countries should consider establishing national vTPA steering committees to facilitate stakeholder dialogue, address challenges and monitor progress.

1. Private-sector engagement should be embedded from the outset, with systematic participation of processors, exporters and industry associations in steering committees and tool development.

2. Support to smaller FBOs and producers should be expanded through group or cooperative models, targeted capacity-building and collective certification to allow smaller operators to benefit from vTPA programmes.

3. Scaling the vTPA approach regionally offers significant benefits, particularly for resource-constrained countries. Implementing vTPA initiatives through regional bodies can streamline processes, reduce costs and improve efficiency by leveraging shared certification bodies and economies of scale.

4. Economic studies measuring the expected and actual trade impacts linked to the use of vTPA programmes at a national and regional level are recommended to inform future project design. Demonstrating the economic benefits related to use of vTPA programmes could result in greater beneficiary buy-in.

5. Given the innovative nature of the vTPA approach in many developing countries, building a network of specialized consultants with vTPA programme expertise is important to provide ongoing, effective support for future projects.

Find out more:

Codex vTPA Guidelines (CXG 93-2021)

https://www.fao.org/fao-who-codexalimentarius/sh-proxy/en/?lnk=1&url=https%253A%252F%252Fworkspace.fao.org%252Fsites%252Fcodex%252FStandards%252FCXG%2B93-2021%252FCXG_093e.pdf

vTPA Programme Assessment Tool (STDF/UNIDO)

https://standardsfacility.org/sites/default/files/UNIDO_vTPA_Assessment_Tool_Eng.pdf

vTPA Readiness Checklist (UNIDO)

https://www.wto.org/library/events/event_resources/sps_12112024/558_1942.pdf

STDF West Africa Project (STDF/PG/665)

<https://www.standardsfacility.org/PG-665>

STDF Central America Project (STDF/PG/682)

<https://www.standardsfacility.org/PG-682>

STDF East Africa Project (STDF/PG/842)

<https://www.standardsfacility.org/PG-842>

WTO SPS Committee Thematic Session (12 November 2024)

https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/sps_e/sps_12112024_e/sps_12112024_e.htm

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