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Developing Human Capital for Food Safety: Global Best Practices and

Policy Lessons for Azerbaijan

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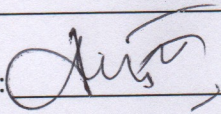
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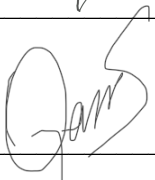
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the shortage of skilled food safety professionals in Azerbaijan and assesses available policy alternatives to close the human capital gap prevalent in this sector. To do so, the study relies on qualitative research methods, including in-depth interviews with representatives from the Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency (AFSA) and the Azerbaijan Food Safety Institute (AFSI), and defines key challenges to the problem at hand in terms of 3 problems leading up to a larger problem of shortage: lack of relevant educational programs, lack of progress in learning new practical skills, and the lack of institutional human resource development conducive to career growth and employee retention. Three policy options were evaluated using five criteria: effectiveness, efficiency, equity, feasibility, and flexibility. The analysis concluded that the most sustainable and impactful solution lies in establishing specialized undergraduate and graduate programs in Azerbaijani universities that meet international standards. This solution addresses the shortage while also offering a high return on investment, enhancing institutional capacity, and reducing the reliance on external support. The paper also provides actionable recommendations such as initiating more partnerships to design practical curricula, focusing on teaching global trends and standards, and providing extra funding for modernization of the study environment and facilities in support of the implementation of this policy.

Key words: Food safety, human capital, curriculum reform, food security, institutional development.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ADAU	Azerbaijan State Agrarian University
AFSA	Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency
AFSI	Azerbaijan Food Safety Institute
Codex	Codex Alimentarius Commission
EU	European Union
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
GOST	Gosudarstvennyy Standart (State Standard of the Soviet Union)
HACCP	Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points
HR	Human Resources
IPPC	International Plant Protection Convention
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
ROI	Return on Investment
SEC	State Examination Center
TACIS	Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States
UN	United Nations
USA	United States of America
WHO	World Health Organization

Chapter 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Information – Food safety in the context of Azerbaijan (Susan)

The challenge of having access to an adequate amount of food has become an alarming issue on a global scale in recent years. In 1996 World Food Summit, food security has been identified as “when all people, at all times, have physical and economic access to sufficient safe and nutritious food that meets their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life” (World Food Summit, 1996). The 4 key dimensions are encompassed in the framework of food security: physical availability of food, economic and physical access to food, food utilization, stability. Food security is the basic human right which demands always having access to an adequate amount of nutritious food for everyone. It is important to note that not all people around the world enjoy the same rights. According to data released by Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2024), “In 2023, an estimated 28.9 percent of the global population – 2.33 billion people – were moderately or severely food insecure, meaning they did not have regular access to adequate food”. To understand the inequality of access to food around the globe and mitigate severe consequences as a result of food scarcity, several factors should be taken into account. Initially, due to conflicts and war zones, most of the population must flee their livelihood dividing communities. According to FAO’s 2024 report, “A surge in conflict in Sudan also contributed to extraordinarily high levels of acute food insecurity, with more than 20 million people facing Crisis conditions or worse (IPC Phase 3 or above) during the lean season in June–September in 2023”. Moreover, climate change is another cause of food scarcity. High temperatures create floods and heat waves significantly undermining the livelihoods causing long-term threat to food security. Lastly, changes in global demographic patterns mismatch with the resources needed for the growth of population. United Nations reports that (2019), “The world’s population is expected to increase by 2 billion persons in the next 30 years, from 7.7 billion currently to 9.7 billion in 2050”.

The agricultural sector is the second biggest employer in the country after oil sector. According to Observatory of Economic Complexity (2022), “Azerbaijan imported \$289 million in wheat, becoming the 43rd largest importer of wheat in the world”. As an attempt to take steps into solving the problem, the government has approved “Program on food safety in the Republic of Azerbaijan” (Aliyev, 2019). As outlined in the 2019–2025 State Program on Food Safety, the

country has committed to strengthening its food safety infrastructure and aligning its policies with international standards. Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency and Azerbaijan Food Safety Institute are the main organizations responsible for overseeing and regulating food security in Azerbaijan. Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency partners with FAO institution in Azerbaijan to modernize food safety capabilities of Azerbaijan, laboratory testing capabilities and ensure that food meets global quality standards. According to the Food Waste Index Report 2021, households in Azerbaijan generate 93 kilograms of food waste per capita per year.

1.1.1 Evolution of the sector

During the period of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Azerbaijan's agriculture sector was mainly dependent on central government's planned agricultural investment. According to the USSR's CIA report (1985), countries across USSR faced challenges in ensuring food production and distribution, highlighting inefficiencies in agricultural production, dependency on imports, and the struggle to meet consumer demands. However, Soviet republics had experienced a bloom during 1965-85s. Especially, Azerbaijan played a pivotal role in cotton production in the 80s. FAO's report on Cotton Review (2019) states that, "In 1981, at its peak of production, the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic accounted for almost 10 percent of produced cotton in the USSR and 1.5 percent of global production". After the collapse of the USSR in 1990s, Azerbaijan's economy had stagnated and productivity in agricultural sector significantly declined. The economy transitioned from centralized planning to market oriented system, and the oil sector dominated the economy. Still, the agriculture sector remained crucial source of revenue for farmers and rural dwellers. Therefore, the government introduced reforms to save the economy from crisis. The laws "On the Fundamentals of Agrarian Reform", "On the Reform of State and Collective Farms" and in 1996 "On Land Reform" were adopted in 1995 to create a legal basis for agrarian reforms. Ibrahimov (2016) notes that "This law, dated 1996, led to irreversible shift from old Soviet-style collective agriculture to individual farming".

1.1.2 State redesign of food safety sector

Azerbaijan conformed its food security policies to Food and Agriculture Organization's standards despite other USSR countries in the post-Soviet era. Countries, like Belarus, the Russian Federation, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, relied on "food self-sufficiency" limiting support from the World Trade Organization (FAO, 2015). However, Azerbaijan's food security policies are aligned

with global standards. FAO's 2015 "Regional overview" report notes that "Outside of the grain sector government policies are designed to ensure a reliable and stable food supply through a combination of domestic production and import as essential for food security and social development" Furthermore, after the collapse of the USSR, gradually introduced reforms to create positive conditions for food security. According to Administrative Department of the President of the Republic of Azerbaijan Presidential library (2020), "The State Program on Poverty Reduction and Sustainable Development in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2008-2015, the State Program on Reliable Food Supply of Population in the Republic of Azerbaijan for 2008-2015, signed by the President for the development of the agrarian sector, The State Program on Socio-Economic Development for 2009-2013 and the Decree on State Support to Producers of Agriculture Products adopted on 23.01.2007 demonstrated its positive effects and made it possible to provide the population with a number of agricultural products through national production". Furthermore, as an attempt to take steps into solving the problem, the government has approved "Program on food safety in the Republic of Azerbaijan" (Aliyev, 2019). As outlined in the 2019–2025 State Program on Food Safety, the country has committed to strengthening its food safety infrastructure and aligning its policies with international standards.

1.1.3 ISO standards and international partnerships

International cooperation plays a pivotal role in addressing food security challenges. It is especially important in Azerbaijan due to the fact that Azerbaijan seeks to diversify its economy to ensure sustainable agricultural practices. Azerbaijan's Food Safety Agency (AFSA) has established significant international partnerships to strengthen its regulatory framework and enhance the skills of its workforce. According to Fuad Mardiyev, Head of International Relations at Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency, "AFSA has three main directions: food safety, animal health - veterinary control, and plant health - phytosanitary control...there are relevant international organizations for these areas" (Personal communication, March 2025). To ensure food safety, animal and plant health, international knowledge and expertise should be shared with relevant organizations to develop climate resilient systems, reliable and nutritious food supply. ISO Standards, Food and Agriculture Organization, World Health Organization (WHO), Codex Alimentarius Commission, and the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) set universal food safety standards and promote collaborative efforts among nations. To ensure global stability and uninterrupted agricultural production, the international community should consolidate efforts

to mitigate the effects of food scarcity challenge. Countries using these frameworks can align their food safety policies and ensure that food meets international quality standards. “The World Bank Group works with partners to build food systems that can feed everyone, everywhere, every day by tackling food insecurity, promoting ‘nutrition-sensitive agriculture’ and improving food safety” (World Bank, 2024).

By engaging all public and private stakeholders, solutions-oriented pathways can be developed to combat skill gaps in the food safety sector. World Economic Forum states (2022), “By uniting more than 200 government and non-governmental partners, including international research institutions, companies and NGOs, Agriculture Innovation Mission (AIM) for Climate enables greater coordination on research, development and deployment of innovative solutions at the intersection of agriculture and climate”.

1.2 Lack of experienced local professionals (Seljan)

Food security is a multifaceted challenge affecting all levels of the population. It requires a robust food safety system that aligns with international standards and practices. “It is necessary to enhance the international cooperation relations with specialized food companies and technological companies, and the attraction of foreign investments for realization of more large innovational projects of the strategic development of the food industry sector” (Babayev, 2023). On the other hand, some internal problems within a country hinder the country’s integration into the global food system. One of the problems is the lack of qualified experts with specialized skills for obtaining international certification. Addressing this problem is essential for the country, as it creates a potential threat for improvement of food security in Azerbaijan. It is worth noting that food safety depends on skilled workforce and acceptable standards. Jebb and Galler (2022) note that “It takes time to recruit and develop these skills and without specific action to boost the workforce, specifically to recruit more official veterinarians and local authority inspectors, it will not be possible to maintain these high standards in the future”. Interviews with representatives from the Azerbaijan Food Safety Agency (AQTA) and the Azerbaijan Food Safety Institute (AFSI) indicate that the limited number of experts in key fields such as veterinary services, phytosanitary control, and food safety analysis remains a critical issue. Unfortunately, countries face unique challenges such as labor mismatch in the agricultural labor market. As technologies in the agriculture sector evolve rapidly, persistent mismatches of the skills needed in the labor market exist which decreases