

ENHANCING THE FOOD SAFETY IN THE TOURISM SECTOR - THE CASE OF MACEDONIA

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Abstract

This paper underlines the important interconnection between tourism and food safety since the food has the key role in the tourists' travel decisions. The paper deals with the food safety in tourism sector and presents a systematic and comprehensive analysis of law regulation on food safety and the factors of food safety standards applied in tourism establishments in Macedonia especially in the hospitality sector as part of it. Its effectiveness fully relies upon the relevant HACCP knowledge and skills, as well as upon other standards and good practices, management commitment and understanding of HACCP along with changes in attitude and organizational structure, thus all requiring adequate training to overcome barriers related to human resources.

The survey points out that the creation of a profitable hospitality industry is largely dependent on compliance with practical and sustainable food safety systems by all participants in the tourism, integrating food safety into the national tourism and food safety development policy and discusses the challenges and recommends solutions as guidelines in which Macedonia can develop policy and target initiatives to strengthen food safety, especially in the small and medium sized tourism business.

Key words: Food safety, tourism development, regulations, HACCP, Macedonia.

1. Introduction

Tourism has a significant impact and a great potential for the economy in Republic of Macedonia and there is a necessity for more attention to the quality of services and products being offered. The focus is on the possibility to identify ways in which countries can practically develop policy and target initiatives

to strengthen food safety, especially in the small and medium sized tourism and hospitality businesses. Governments and private sector entities alike have responsibility to improve food safety, which requires educating and involving all stakeholders in the food chain in the production of safe food (Loader and Jill [1]).

In order to face with the new trends and innovations in the "globalized" world and to contribute to faster breakdown of the limits in tourism, almost every country makes efforts to be in step with the latest innovations in technology and internationally accepted and implemented standards set by economically high - developed countries. During the past few decades, ISO – system of standards as worldwide recognized management quality system, has successfully played a significant role in maintaining close relations and cooperation among countries and different sectors in each country. Nowadays, there are new standards that contribute to higher productivity, safety, quality and customer protection as great and very important factors for modern people and environment. One of those management quality systems is HACCP, which can be very easily applied in all sectors in which food safety is of primary concern and is expected to be on high level. Tourist sector needs to implement such management quality system in order to identify and control all Critical Control Points (CCP), to reduce risk and maintain customer protection (tourists). As proactive and systematic approach of food safety in tourist establishments, HACCP implementation calls for common and simultaneous application in all sectors of the country. Today, every country is well acknowledged by its benefits and more and more Governments force its compulsory implementation, supported by regulations. That means that the first question regarding food safety standards in the

Republic of Macedonia in this research paper is connected with the legislative and regulations and a contrastive analysis with those in other neighboring and European countries.

Many efforts are present in the line of implementation of harmonization as the biggest and the most efficient attempt for standard internationalization, which as an outcome produce multilateral and bilateral agreements (Hooker and Caswell [2]). The result is foreseen in challenges for coordination and unique mutual control to force the governments to reduce the regulative differences, which are often based on voluntary codes for good practices.

As a consequence to the great importance of the service sector in the economic development of each country, the necessity for standardization of tourism services and products is always highlighted (WTO [3]). The standards are assurance for the tourism products quality, thus representing powerful instruments in the tourism sector. Being a model, document or just a concept, the standard, as well as the process of its creation and implementation, meaning standardization, are crucial in the everyday globalization of food trade and tourism (Krechmer [4]).

In addition, today's tourists are ready to pay much more in order to consume food products with higher safety level (Laesser and Peters [5]), thus boosting the food with higher quality in the tourism and hospitality sector (Gehlhar and Coyle [6]). Most of the tourists generate from developed countries being fully aware over the healthy food consumption (Humphrey *et al.* [7]) hence initiating radical changes and improvements in the food and drink preferences. The feedback of government and tourism sector towards these tendencies within the tourism development vary due to the country's profile and overall development (Borraz [8]).

The role and meaning of some international standards, as ISO 9000, HACCP system and similar, has been particularly increased in the past years (Gertler and Waldman [9]). The application of the HACCP system is accepted as the food safety management system to enhance food safety along the food chain. That means that the second part of the research paper deals with the results of a survey conducted in the tourism sector in the Republic of Macedonia which gave us relevant information regarding the main problems which face the managers and tourists in the field of food safety. From variety of factors for its implementation in the tourism enterprises (Holleran *et al.* [10]), the law legislative is the most important one, aimed at accomplishing it and represents base for further implementation and control of food safety standards. Namely, there is important interconnection between tourism and food safety since the food and

food quality, as one of the components of complex tourism product, has the key role in the tourists' travel decisions. The implementation of the system acquires additional resources, for example: significant investments in purchasing new equipment, redesign of the kitchen and restaurant service area, investments in training of the management and other employees, purchasing supplies for cleaning and disinfection, technical expertise and advice. Anyway, compared to all costs for its implementation taken together, the benefits of HACCP system implementation are much bigger and more important. Because of this reason HACCP system in many aspects plays an important role not only in tourist sector development, but also in other sectors in every country.

2. Materials and Methods

For the completion of this mixed research, a set of qualitative and quantitative methods, principles and different approaches, tools and techniques such as survey, interview and informal questionnaires were implemented. From qualitative research methods we have used historical and dialectic methods in development of food safety regulations and authorities, as well as comparative method for a contrastive analysis of food safety national systems in many European countries and the USA. In the presentation and analyses of collected empirical data, quantitative methods have been used, such statistical and mathematical methods. The cost-benefit analysis is used in presenting the results, as well as tables, graphs and pies. The research encompassed two phases, whereas each consisted of set of questions.

The survey was conducted in the period from March to June 2009 on national level in many cities including the capital city of Skopje. The main survey aim was to define the motives, outcomes and main problems for HACCP application in tourism sector in Macedonia. The first target segment was consisted of the managers and supervisors employed in tourism enterprises. 120 questionnaires were distributed by regular mail, e-mail and through personal delivery, from which 93 managers or 78% responded. The sample consisted of almost equal number of managers and supervisors from hotels, motels and restaurants with the intention of making a comparison in implementation of standards, meaning the management systems for quality and food safety. The second target phase was intended for the tourists as consumers of food in tourism sector, in order to find out the level of their sense and knowledge in food safety and what efforts they undertake for better food safety and food quality, as well as their priorities and requirements from food service establishments in the area of food safety. 150 questionnaires were distributed, out of which 135 replied or 90%.

3. Results and Discussion

Macedonia is developing and enhancing the national system of food safety control by implementation of legal measures and regulations which ensures general conditions for food safety. The government adopted several laws, bylaws, statutes, programs and other legal acts on food safety. Almost ten years ago, the Law on food safety and Regulations regarding the food safety, products and surface materials that have food contact, (Official Gazette of Republic of Macedonia [12]) is adopted and being supplemented in 2007/08 with obligatory application of HACCP system. During the past years, many additional legal acts were adopted and implemented, thus resulting with preparation of Monitoring program on food safety in Republic of Macedonia (Official Gazette of Republic of Macedonia [13]). In accordance with the Regulations for methodology used in implementation of monitoring the food safety (Official Gazette of Republic of Macedonia [14]), the above mentioned program determines the presence of food contaminants in the country, which has high importance for tourism sector development. In the formulation and preparation of the food safety legislative in Macedonia, several governmental bodies and institutions have played major role which are main coordinators for its implementation and control. In that line, the implementation of HACCP system is fully supported by the government, the Ministry of Economy, the Agency for support of entrepreneurship, as well as by non-governmental sector and many other concerned parties, which are fully aware about the importance of having good food quality. Since January the 1st, 2011, Macedonian Government has adopted the concept of organization of food safety on national level, used by some Baltic countries (Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania, than Bulgaria, Slovenia) and formed a national Food Safety Agency, which. In accordance to the recommendations of Brussels will prepare perennial national plan for monitoring of food and food control. Which factors have dominant participation in the HACCP application, largely depends on enterprise's size and its market share. Subsequently, the matter of barriers to HACCP application in small and/or less developed businesses was extensively debated and thus resulted with guidelines with practical solutions for its functioning. In that respect, the HACCP system is fully and widely supported within the nation legislation, being transformed as a component for standardization of international food quality control. Accordingly, in the European Union, the principles of HACCP-system are fully accepted within the Directive 93/43 in 1993 (Zigges [11]).

Hence, Macedonian food safety legislation is in accordance with the European regulations, meaning that it follows the world global trends and tendencies for improving the food safety and quality implemented

in all sectors of economic development. Even though major efforts are made in order to enhance the food safety, several gaps are identified especially in the process of implementing the HACCP standards.

Compared to the HACCP implementation in other countries, despite the major investments, variety of gaps are present when introducing the HACCP system in Macedonia. Respectfully, they can be detected as: lack of printed materials and literature for adequate guiding the managers in the tourism sector; limited approach to information; insufficient technical support by the government and its institutions and bodies; complex administrative procedures; lack of unique certification body and accreditation agency for institutions and consultants entitled for implementation of HACCP system and of other nature. Having in mind that the size and type of the tourism enterprises must be taken in consideration when implementing the HACCP standard, great effort was made in the its initial phase of implementation. Namely, the number of employees in the tourism enterprises was the basic criterion for setting and adjusting the principles, in-depth analysis as well as current situation of the tourism business sector. The Table 1 presents the categorization of the enterprises according to the Food Directorate in the frames of the Ministry of Health Direction, which enables better control when implementation the food safety management system in Macedonia.

Table 1. Enterprises with obligatory implementation of HACCP system in Macedonia

Cat.	Type of enterprise	Enterprises No	Fully implemented HACCP	Partially implemented HACCP
I	Food-service establishments	320	98	140
II	Food-service operators with craft production	4,242	29	1,339
III	Trade enterprises and firms and establishments that serve only beverages Public food-service establishments Catering, Food transport and food storage	4,665	176	1,648

The application of HACCP system in the tourism sector may be fulfilled by launching certain modifications, firstly, in the line of integrating general and specific threats for easier control, as defining critical control points in developing HACCP plan etc. These kinds of modification have already been established in many developing countries in the line of achieving requests of other countries which successfully implement this

standard for many years. Until January 2009, according to Ministry of Health, the HACCP system in Macedonia was implemented only by some larger food-industry enterprises which export goods for European market and by some larger hotels situated in the capital city of Skopje and in the most famous tourism place – Ohrid, which offered tourism services mainly to foreign tourists. The main concern of the managers in tourism sector is appropriate level of standardization which combined with the process of differentiation will result in successful working.

The survey produced interesting information regarding the food standards implemented until June 2009. Namely, among all standards noted in the query: HACCP, ISO, GHP and GMP, the HACCP system is the most applied one (Table 2), although still being in the early stage of introduction in Macedonia.

Table 2. Application of standards in tourism sector in Macedonia

Rank	Standards	%
1	HACCP	51
2	ISO 9000	12
3	GHP & GMP	11

Due to the fact that HACCP effectiveness fully relies upon the relevant knowledge, skills, commitment and understanding of the management, several questions of the query addressed that issue. The main aim was to discover managerial basic motives for HACCP implementation within the tourism and hospitality sector. According to the relevance, the motives are ranked in Table 3.

Table 3. Motives for HACCP implementation in tourism sector in Macedonia

Rank	Motives	%
1	Legislation	35
2	Improving quality of products and services	17
3	Control in food handling	14
4	HACCP system as good practice	12
5	Increasing the efficiency	6
6	Reducing the guests' compliances	5
7	Strengthening the brand	5
8	Competition	3
9	Attracting more guests	2
10	Other	1

It is noticeable, that legislation is the basic and the biggest stimulus for introduction of HACCP system in Macedonia, far beyond the other managerial motives. The extremely high financial penalties complemented

with work cuts, are the crucial pressure on the managers and entrepreneurs in tourism sector to define solutions for HACCP appliance. As a result to the correlation between standardization and differentiation, the tourism managers should implement both processes as right combination in order to achieve best results.

Since the tourists are the most important subject in the food safety chain, their opinion on several issues, provoke serious interest. In particular, the consumers' attitude toward factors for food safety is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. Factors for tourists' food safety in tourism sector in Macedonia

Rank	Factors	%
1	Hygienic conditions of the tourism facility	41
2	Application of standards and legislation	18
3	Personnel hygiene	17
4	Look and taste of the food	11
5	Inspection controls	9
6	Tourists' hygiene	4

From the noted factors in the query, the consumers identified the hygienic conditions of the tourism facility as the most important one, meaning firstly the kitchen's and toilet's hygiene. It is also interesting, that the respondents underlined the necessity of practicing good personnel hygienic conditions, since 17% identified it as an important contributor to the food quality and safety. The tourists neglected the importance of their own hygiene and detected it as the less important factor (only 4%), despite the fact that for well informed consumers and tourists, the personal hygiene must be among the most important factors for food safety. Further on, the survey gained conclusions regarding the recognizability of HACCP standards in Macedonia. Namely, majority of tourism food consumers are familiarized with the ISO 22.000 standards on food safety. The interviewers, representing the domestic tourist have full confidence in these standards and have ability to recognize them. The outcome of 70% positive response of the interviewers clearly indicates that they are fully introduced with the meaning of the HACCP standards. Most probably this high positive result is partially consequence of the governmental promotion campaign for implementation of this important standards and practices, which took place almost simultaneously with the research. However, one-third of the interviewed tourists has never been informed or has not been fully assured regarding the real practical meaning of the HACCP system for tourism sector.

4. Conclusions

- The issue of underlining the important interconnection between tourism and food safety has been many times addressed in the scientific papers in Macedonia, but there are very few empirical researches, which practically present additional support to the theoretical guidelines.
- In that respect, beside the important notes on food safety legislation, detected gaps in HACCP implementation, as well as introduction of some relevant experiences regarding the application of HACCP standard within the tourism sector in Macedonia, the paper describes considerable recommendations. Specifically, sequences from a detailed survey are presented as starting points for strengthening the knowledge and skills, management commitment and understanding of HACCP along with changes in attitude and organizational structure, thus all requiring adequate training to overcome barriers related to human resources.
- Hence, the survey points out that the tourism development in Macedonia, as well as creation of a profitable hospitality industry, are largely dependent on compliance with practical and sustainable food safety systems by all participants in the tourism sector. In the same line, one of the outcomes refers to the necessity of integrating food safety into the national tourism and food security development policy.

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