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Enhancing the efficacy of local official food controls in Finland

The primary legal responsibility for ensuring food safety lies with food business operators. However, official controls shall also be implemented to ensure that food handling complies with the relevant requirements. The main objective of this work was to examine the factors behind efficacious local official food controls and the possibilities for improving the efficacy of the controls at different levels of the food control chain in Finland. The second objective was to investigate the consistency and quality of the local official food controls and ways to enhance these. Studies were conducted on four different levels of the food control chain, i.e. level of food business operators, level of official inspecting staff, level of management for the official inspecting staff, and level of auditing of official food controls. Businesses that both prepared and served foods (here 'restaurants') were chosen as representatives of food businesses.

Positive correlations were found between the hygiene knowledge of restaurant business operators, their attitudes towards official food control, and the hygiene level of their operations. Proper justification of control measures used by food control officials, provision of guidance, and a negotiative approach in tasks of official food controls appear to be highly important for improving hygiene in food establishments. Factors related both to the food control official and the working unit of the official may affect the inspection processes and the efficacy of controls. The use of checklists and templates for inspection reports were noted to enhance the consistency and efficacy of controls. The templates also reduced the time used in preparing inspection reports and increased the quality of these reports. Time limits for correcting non-compliances had a significant impact on the efficacy of controls. Food control units had created adequate working conditions by providing their staff with guidance papers, templates, and possibilities to collectively hold discussions. However, poor orientation of new staff, non-systematic utilization of tacit knowledge through converting it to explicit knowledge and sharing it, and incomplete commitment among staff to quality systems remain challenges in the units. Poor workplace atmosphere and weaknesses in organization of work may be reflected in lesser appreciation of food businesses operators towards official food controls. The regional officials (auditors) had experienced the auditing visits as clearly more useful and positive than the municipal officials (auditees) and also found the current auditing system to be more suitable for the purpose. The regional officials stated that the auditing results had not been adequately utilized in planning the guidance and education of professionals working in official food control.

Based on the results of this work, certain weaknesses exist in the efficacy and consistency of local official food controls in Finland. However, several means to improve the efficacy and consistency of the controls were identified on all studied levels of the food control chain. Some of the observed impact possibilities, such as using checklists during inspections and using templates for inspection reports, are relatively simple to implement. Other measures, such as fully implementing risk-based procedures during inspections and more systematic utilization of the tacit knowledge that is present among the official food control staff, would require a substantial amount of time and effort of the food control authorities.