

FOOD SAFETY

Lessons from Denmark

SOHEL PARVEZ, back from Copenhagen

If you visit a food court in Copenhagen, you will notice smiley icons at the entrance of restaurants. You see a paper with a smiley symbol posted on the door on the right top corner. Below the symbol is written the word "Elite".

This may not instigate curiosity in the mind of a newcomer in the town. Yet, for the Danes, the Elite-Smiley means a lot: the restaurant is compliant with food related rules and has the best inspection history.

Tasty Bite, a food business at the central part of the capital of Denmark, is no exception. It has started using the Elite-Smiley icon after the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration (DVFA) found the business compliant in the last four inspections and gave no remarks in the last 12 months.

"The flow of customers has increased since we have got the Elite-Smiley. Many customers come to our store after seeing the inspection reports," said Tushar Thomassen, owner of Tasty Bite, which serves customers pizza and other dishes.

He said food businesses have to post the smiley reports to inform consumers about the compliance of the enterprise with rules and regulations to ensure food safety. Otherwise, food business operators have to face administrative actions.

"This is good for my business. Flow of customer begins to increase once a store gets the top grade for food safety," said Thomassen, who left Bangladesh two decades ago.

The case of Thomassen is a glaring example of how Denmark ensures food safety for people at home and abroad.

The Nordic country is one of the main food exporting nations in Europe and 40 percent of its food exports are sold as high value products at prices 20 percent above the EU average.

Of all goods exported by Denmark, around a quarter comes from the food cluster, according to Food Nation, a public-private partnership established by the Danish government and private organisations and companies.

To secure food safety from farm to fork, the Danish authorities have established a traceability system to track and trace food ingredients all the way back to the raw materials, said its officials.

So, if any problem is detected, the DVFA can trace the source of the problem and address the issue, said Morten Carlmann Andersen, special adviser of the international cooperation division of the DVFA under the environment and food ministry of Denmark.

The ministry is the single authority that

aims to ensure sustainable and innovative food production and exports by taking care of nature and the environment and ensuring consumer protection.

With its five agencies including Danish Agricultural Agency, Environmental Protection Agency, Danish Fisheries Agency, the Coastal Authority and the DVFA, the ministry is responsible for framing rules and regulations related to environmental protection, farming and food production and administering compliance of the rules.

Officials of the DVFA said they take care of food safety issues by coordinating with other related agencies responsible for food production and protection of environment and nature.

By contrast, at least four ministries look after all these issues in Bangladesh and issues of coordination among the ministries and related agencies continue to be a major challenge for ensuring food safety.

Andersen said Denmark had several ministries earlier. The environment and food ministry was created in June 2015 by merging the environment, food, and agriculture and fisheries ministries.

The DVFA consists of five departments, including those for veterinary, meat inspection and food safety.

The departments of veterinary and meat handle inspections of farmed animals, formulate policies in relation to animal health, animal welfare and veterinary medicine, animal slaughtering process and

WHY DENMARK STANDS OUT

It has merged all ministries related to food safety and production into one for better coordination

It focuses on compliance of food businesses to ensure food safety, instead of checking products

Its Smiley Scheme lets consumers make more informed choices on where to shop and gives food enterprises incentive to secure high food safety

Enterprises with hazardous conditions are closed down until problems are fixed

meat processing in slaughterhouses.

The food safety department handles food inspections of raw materials as well as finished products and inspect food establishments to check internal control schemes, hygiene and labelling.

The department is also responsible for formulating legislation and policies on



STAR

Tushar Thomassen, owner of Tasty Bite, which serves customers with pizza and other dishes, poses at his restaurant in Copenhagen recently. His company has received Elite-Smiley, which is awarded to enterprises with the best inspection history.

food and feed safety, chemistry and food quality, and diet and nutrition, according to the DVFA, which has a laboratory to test samples of food, production and processing ingredients.

Such an arrangement allows the ministry to carry out its responsibilities better, officials said.

They said primary producers, particularly milk producers, must register their herd and carry out other activities with the authorities and no farmer can provide medicines or other stuff without first availing prescription of registered veterinary persons.

The DVFA said food businesses have to ensure compliance and follow good manufacturing practices and procedures of the Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point to ensure safe processing and production of foods.

And, every food business operator has to register with the DVFA. No food activity may begin until the DVFA visits the premises and grants conditional approval.

Tasty Bite's owner Thomassen said he has to keep receipts of the purchase of ingredients of food he prepares to serve customers.

In order to ensure the highest marking from the inspectors of the DVFA, he has to

maintain hygiene in all stages of food-making and serving food to customers.

This begins from hand washing facilities to food-making. The businesses have to regularly monitor the temperatures of foodstuff and maintain records so that they can show it to inspectors, he said.

"Inspectors do not give any prior notice about an inspection. They can arrive at any time," said Thomassen.

Andersen said the DVFA focuses on compliance of food businesses to ensure food safety, instead of checking products.

"Our control system is based on the principle that the responsibility of food safety lies with the producer or the business operator. What we do is that we have gone from controlling or checking products to checking businesses."

"We check businesses to see whether they do their jobs right, have correct procedures and are able to produce and sell their products safely," he said.

And by giving smiley inspection reports, the authorities inform consumers about the compliance situation in the food enterprises.

The DVFA introduced smileys on inspection reports in 2001 to enable consumers to make more informed choices on where to shop and

to give food enterprises an incentive to secure a high level of food safety.

The authorities use four different smileys that signal how well the enterprise complies with food regulations.

The enterprises get best smileys when inspectors do not leave any remark and the negative smiley which means that the business faces administrative penalties, has been reported to the police, or the approval has been withdrawn.

Andersen said better compliance results in better smiley reports.

The DVFA said all shops, restaurants and other enterprises selling food and beverages to the public are inspected on a regular basis – ranging from once in every two years to one to three times a year. How often is decided on a risk evaluation of all lines of food enterprises, it added.

And all results and inspectors' remarks are published on the inspection report. The smiley is determined by the worst of the results. Enterprises with poor results will get a follow-up inspection, paid by the enterprise.

Smiley reports are to be posted in all supermarkets, groceries, bakeries, butchers, greengrocers, kiosks, restaurants, pizzerias, canteens, hospital kitchens, and elderly homes.

The reports must be displayed for consumers to read before they decide to enter a shop or a restaurant. The reports must also be made easily available on the homepage of the websites of enterprises.

The DVFA introduced the elite-smiley in 2008 and enterprises with the best inspection records are using grading in their marketing.

"It works!" said the DVFA on its web page. "Virtually all consumers know of and appreciate the Smiley Scheme. A majority of consumers have declined a restaurant because of a negative smiley."

It said many companies take steps to improve standards and stay at the tip of their toes to attain a good smiley.

"The scheme has improved uniformity and increased the quality of inspections and inspection reports. Inspectors say that compliance has increased because of the smiley," it said.

Thomassen praised the Smiley Scheme.

He said both customers and food businesses would be conscious if the food safety authorities in Bangladesh introduce similar schemes to ensure compliance with food safety rules and regulations.

"We care a lot about ensuring food safety. Customers decide whether they will get into a restaurant or not by looking at the inspection reports," he said.

Monitoring businesses, not products, pays off

Says top official of Danish food authority

SOHEL PARVEZ, back from Copenhagen

ANYONE following news reports is aware that various authorities and agencies here are checking food items in markets and destroying those found to be adulterated, substandard or unsafe.

But if you look to Denmark, you will see something new.

The Nordic country, known for producing safe food, focuses more on checking businesses than checking products to ensure that the foods, be that fresh, packaged or prepared, are produced and served to consumers in a safe manner following the right procedures.

"We have gone from controlling or checking products to checking businesses. We check that businesses do their jobs rightly and they have correct procedures and are able to produce or sell products safely," said Morten Carlmann Andersen, special adviser of the international cooperation division of the Danish Veterinary and Food Administration (DVFA).

"Our control system is based on the principle that the responsibility for food safety is that of the producer or the business operator, not the government organisations," he said in an interview with The Daily Star in Copenhagen earlier this month.

He said getting all the products checked by the government authority would be very time-consuming and would require a lot of resources. When businesses take the responsibility of ensuring food safety of their products, it saves both time and resources.

"We want companies to be responsible for the products they produce. It gives ownership, promotes greater responsibility within the companies and ensures greater partnership between companies and government authorities," he said.



Morten Carlmann Andersen

For Andersen, the idea comes from the goal of establishing a system where authorities will frame rules and procedures and help food business operators produce safe and quality foods.

"If something is not correct and companies are trying to do it right, we help them to do it right. Our idea is not to go and punish them but to make sure that whatever was wrong is fixed and is not repeated in the future."

"There is no point in punishing someone for doing something right now and then not having it right in the future. We would much rather not

punish them and have it right in the future," said Andersen.

In order to ensure the production of safe food, the Danish authorities have established a traceability system from farm to fork so that they can trace the source whenever any problem occurs.

"That is the way, we set up rules that help businesses to do the right things," he said.

If there is a problem in any product, the DVFA asks the business for the source and it has to answer. Otherwise, it faces sanctions.

"When you start doing that then all of a sudden you do not need to do

the checking, they do the checking. Because they have to be able to tell you this. If not, either we help them do it or if they do it on purpose we sanction them. Ultimately, we can say you cannot operate as a business if you do not do this," said Andersen.

To establish a safe value chain, the DVFA under the Ministry of Environment and Food of Denmark collects samples of ingredients of food, feeds, additives, aromas, drugs, pesticide, soil and pests and tests those in its laboratories on a regular basis. This is used to secure a risk-based approach to inspections.

At the same time, the authorities

"We check that businesses do their jobs rightly and they have correct procedures and are able to produce or sell products safely."

have also developed an incentive mechanism so that producers and business operators comply with rules.

For example, it provides a good amount of compensation so that farmers report outbreaks of disease in animals and help the government in its control and eradication.

Andersen, giving the example of the DVFA's Smiley Scheme under which food businesses are given four types of smiley symbols from worst to best based on inspection reports, said the frequency of unannounced inspections by the DVFA reduces if food businesses do things well.

"If then you have problems and do not complying with rules properly, we will come more often and you will have to pay to do the controls."

In order to establish food safety from farm to fork, Denmark merged several institutions into one to get one comprehensive responsible institution for food safety. It is now the DVFA.

"So, if there is lead in the milk at the farm that is their (DVFA) responsibility. If there is lead in milk in the super market, that is their responsibility too."

Andersen said food safety system in Denmark is the result of general development of the country over centuries. And the level of education of people plays an important role in ensuring food safety throughout the value chain.

And Bangladesh can go gradually to develop a well-functioning system to ensure safe food for all.

"It takes time. It takes times to mature. Transition cannot be done very quickly," he said, adding that the requirements can be set based on the educational level attained by the target group and their ability to abide by it.

"For instance, if it is street vender cooking meals, you need to tell him that you need to have clean water. You (street vendor) need to wash your hands whenever you are done. There are the few things that they can understand and that will be the basis there. If it's a little bit bigger operator, then you would have demands that are little bit higher."

Andersen said a company should focus on winning the trust of people in order to do good business.

"I think, credibility, openness, willingness to cooperate and partnership are going to be key in the future and you see it in many businesses globally."

At the same time, accountability of stakeholders is important. Because, if no one is held accountable, results will continue to be bad, he said.

Andersen also talked on exporting foods. He said cheap labour is an advantage for Bangladesh whereas labour cost in Denmark—one of the leading food exporting countries—is very high.

"So, if you can get a product that people believe in, you will more often be able to produce it cheaper than we can. So, you have the opportunity to do something," he said.

But he said companies need to be able to prove that their products are safe, sustainable, and are of good quality.

"I think there is no shortcut. There is no easy fix. I think you need to work on the entire system. You need to prove that you can do this."