



AFRICAN FOOD REGULATORY AUTHORITIES FORUM (AFRAF)

African Food Risk Assessment Hub

Pôle africain d'évaluation des risques alimentaires

A proposed AFRAF mechanism for expertise, competency development, data, tools and scientific assessment

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CO-AUTHORS

Usman Cisse · Côte d'Ivoire

Ministry of Agriculture, Rural Development and Food Crops

Hadi Abdelati Hadi Elalem · Libya

Libyan National Centre for Standardization and Metrology (LNCMS)

Henintsoa Harizafy · Madagascar

Ministry of Trade and Consumption

Holystone Maumsamatha Kafanikhale · Malawi

Ministry of Health and Sanitation, Public Health Division

Raymonda Adeline Bernardette Johnson · Sierra Leone

Ministry of Agriculture and Food Security

Andrew Amankwah Lartey · Ghana

Ghana Standards Authority (GSA)

Dominique Lantomalala Raharinosy · Madagascar

Ministry of Trade and Consumption

Gloria Jeremiah · Malawi

Ministry of Health and Sanitation

Mohamed Braika · Mauritania

Mauritanian Food Safety Agency (AMSSA)

Paul Mwambu · Uganda

Department of Crop Inspection and Certification (National Plant Protection Organization), Ministry of Agriculture, Animal Industry and Fisheries

and the **Science and Policy Team**, Global Food Regulatory Science Society (GFRSS)

AI-assisted drafting.

PROPOSED CONCEPT

A regulator-led **African Hub** that mobilizes existing expertise and institutions to **strengthen food risk assessment** in support of food regulatory decisions. It would operate as a coordinated enabling mechanism under AFRAF—not as a new statutory structure. Its initial focus would be on risk assessment serving the formulation of food regulatory decisions, with the possibility of later evolution toward selected elements of the wider food risk analysis framework, subject to AFRAF priorities.

1 Purpose and strategic proposition

AFRAF was established as a regulator-driven platform to strengthen food regulatory governance and cooperation across Africa. Its working arrangements emphasize coordination, practical collaboration and the mobilization of existing capacities rather than institutional duplication. Three Working Groups have been established under AFRAF: the **AFRAF Capacity Building Working Group of AFRAF Academy**, focused on capacity-building coordination, peer learning and better use of existing expertise and training resources; the **Risk-Based Food Regulatory Oversight Working Group**, focused on strengthening evidence-driven approaches to regulatory oversight, including prioritization, monitoring and data

generation; and the **Food Regulatory Modernization in Support of Food Innovation Working Group**, focused on supporting the evolution of food control systems in response to changing food systems, new technologies, food and ingredient innovation and emerging regulatory needs.

This paper proposes that AFRAF develop an **African Food Risk Assessment Hub** as a cross-cutting **scientific enabling mechanism** supporting the work of these three Working Groups and, more broadly, African food regulatory authorities. The Hub would focus initially and deliberately on **food risk assessment**: mobilizing African expertise; strengthening competencies; improving access to fit-for-purpose data, methodologies and scientific tools; and supporting the conduct, adaptation and peer review of risk assessments needed by food regulators. It would bring together and facilitate access to capacities already available within African competent authorities, African and international academic centers, laboratories and research institutions, making them more readily available to address national, REC and continental needs. The Hub would therefore complement and reinforce existing structures rather than duplicate them. Over time, and subject to priorities identified by AFRAF and its members, its scope could progressively evolve to support additional elements of the broader **food risk analysis framework**.

The proposition responds to a practical constraint: modern food risk assessment requires multidisciplinary competencies—including toxicology, microbiology, exposure assessment, epidemiology, statistics, mathematical modelling and data science—that are rarely concentrated within a single institution. Academic training pathways specifically dedicated to regulatory food risk assessment remain limited, while short-term training activities and workshops alone cannot develop independent and experienced risk assessors. Sustainable capacity therefore requires a more progressive approach combining **structured learning, mentoring, supervised practice through real risk assessments, access to appropriate data and scientific tools, peer review, and participation in sustained communities of practice**. The proposed Hub would provide a mechanism through which these elements can progressively be brought together and made available to the African food regulatory community.

2 Positioning within AFRAF

The African Food Risk Assessment Hub would be developed as a shared workstream spanning the three AFRAF areas most directly connected to science-based regulatory decision-making:

- **AFRAF Academy** – competency frameworks, training pathways, mentoring, peer learning, expert exchanges and recognition/benchmarking of acquired competencies.
- **Risk-Based Food Regulatory Oversight** – translation of risk assessment into monitoring priorities, inspection and surveillance strategies, rapid assessment, and evidence-based allocation of regulatory resources.
- **Food Regulatory Modernization in Support of Food Innovation** – strengthening and modernizing regulatory frameworks, approaches and capabilities to respond to innovation in foods, ingredients, processes and technologies; enabling timely and science-based evaluation of innovative products; making greater use of regulatory data, data science and digital tools; leveraging international assessments and regulatory reliance; and adapting standards, technical regulations and regulatory pathways to support innovation while maintaining appropriate food safety oversight.

This cross-working-group design is important: risk assessment should not become an isolated scientific exercise. It should be connected to the questions risk managers need answered, to the data generated through monitoring and laboratories, to regulatory modernization priorities, and to the capacity-building pathway required to sustain the function.

3 Proposed functions

A. African expertise pool

Establish and maintain a **voluntary roster of qualified experts** and **institutions by discipline and experience**. The Hub would mobilize this pool through time-limited scientific panels, peer-review groups, mentoring arrangements or standing communities of practice. Competent authorities would remain central to nominations and ownership, with academia, laboratories and other scientific institutions contributing specialized capability.

B. Competency development and qualification benchmarking

Develop an African competency framework for food risk assessment, distinguishing foundational, applied and advanced competencies. Training would move beyond attendance-based workshops toward progressive pathways combining coursework, case studies, supervised practice, participation in real assessments, mentorship and continuing professional development. The Hub could develop a benchmarking or recognition mechanism for demonstrated competencies—useful to regulators and, where appropriate, industry—without seeking to replace academic degrees or professional licensing.

C. Training coordination and international connectivity

Map and tailor existing programs rather than recreate them. The Hub could connect African regulators and scientists to established initiatives and networks, including EFSA's EU-FORA fellowship model and the xORA education initiative, and develop reciprocal partnerships with BfR, ANSES, EFSA, FAO/WHO networks and other risk-assessment bodies. International programs would be adapted to African regulatory questions, data realities and food systems.

D. African food-safety data resources

Enable access to fit-for-purpose data for assessment, including occurrence/concentration data for chemical and microbiological hazards, food consumption information, Total Diet Study outputs, surveillance and monitoring data, and other relevant datasets. The model should be federated where appropriate: the Hub need not own every dataset, but should support common data dictionaries, metadata, quality criteria, access rules and interoperability with existing AUC, REC and national data systems.

E. Tools, methods and data science

Provide a curated toolbox and technical support for dietary exposure assessment, probabilistic methods, predictive microbiology, dose-response and mathematical models, evidence synthesis, uncertainty analysis, data visualization and emerging computational approaches. Shared methods and reusable workflows would reduce duplication and improve consistency across assessments.

F. Priority-setting and scientific assessments

Create a transparent mechanism for identifying questions of continental or multi-country relevance. The Hub could undertake or coordinate full, rapid or targeted assessments; adapt or contextualize existing JECFA, JEMRA and other FAO/WHO assessments; rely on assessments from recognized national or regional authorities where appropriate; and identify where African data materially change the assessment. The default should be reliance and adaptation before de novo assessment.

G. Support to standards, technical regulations and innovation

Provide scientific inputs, on request, to African standards-development and regulatory processes, including ARSO-related needs, REC technical regulations and national measures. The same capacity could support

safety assessments for innovative ingredients, foods, processing technologies and other regulated products, including work commissioned by the food production sector under transparent scientific-independence safeguards.

H. Horizon scanning and emerging issues

Maintain a collaborative process to identify emerging hazards, technologies and regulatory questions where early scientific work or data generation would benefit multiple African authorities.

4 Complementarity—not institutional duplication

DESIGN PRINCIPLE

The Hub should add connective tissue to Africa’s emerging food-safety architecture. It should strengthen and supply existing mandates, mobilize existing networks and centres of expertise, and avoid creating a parallel mandate or duplicating initiatives carried out by Regional Economic Communities (RECs), the African Union Commission (AUC), the soon to be operationalized African Food Safety Agency (AFSA), the African Organization for Standardization (ARSO) or national structures.

The Hub would operate exclusively in an advisory and enabling capacity. Regulatory decisions would remain with national competent authorities and the legally mandated REC or continental structures. This separation should be explicit in its terms of reference and scientific procedures.

In particular, the Hub should be designed to:

- support, and ultimately be available to, the African Food Safety Agency (AFSA) as that continental mechanism is operationalized;
- work with ARSO and other standards bodies by supplying scientific evidence where food-safety standards or technical regulations require a risk-assessment foundation, without assuming standards-setting authority;
- interoperate with AUC data initiatives and national data systems rather than building a competing all-purpose data platform;
- reinforce REC mechanisms, including the contemplated COMESA Regional SPS Risk Assessment Centre; the Hub could provide continental expertise, methods, training and data linkages to such REC centres while REC structures retain their own governance and work programmes;
- serve other RECs that may choose different institutional models, allowing each REC to draw from a wider African pool without requiring every sub-region to reproduce every scientific discipline.

5 Governance and scientific integrity

The governance and operational arrangements for the Hub should be developed progressively, with the objective of preserving its **“by regulators for regulators”** character while enabling it to draw effectively on the broader scientific community. Rather than defining a permanent governance structure at the outset, AFRAF could consider an initial coordination arrangement linked to its existing governance and Working Groups, while experience is gained through implementation. As the **current operator supporting AFRAF**, GFORSS could be tasked with facilitating this initial development phase and exploring, in consultation with

AFRAF members and partners, **options for a sustainable governance**, hosting and operational model. This could include identifying appropriate partnerships, potential hosting arrangements involving African competent authorities or other institutions, and mechanisms to secure the financial and technical resources required to sustain the Hub over time.

GFORSS could also be invited to **develop a sustainability and resource-mobilization approach for consideration by AFRAF**, drawing on development partners, participating authorities, scientific institutions, international partners and, where appropriate, carefully structured cost-recovery mechanisms. The objective would not be to predetermine where the Hub should ultimately reside or how it should be governed, but to **test workable arrangements** and progressively develop a model that ensures **African regulatory ownership, scientific independence, operational effectiveness and financial sustainability**.

Whatever governance model ultimately emerges, the scientific credibility of the Hub would depend less on a particular physical location or institutional structure than on **transparent, credible and repeatable scientific procedures**. These could progressively address request intake and prioritization; formulation of questions between risk managers and assessors; selection of experts based on documented competencies; declaration and management of interests; confidentiality and data governance; documentation of assumptions and uncertainties; appropriate peer review; communication and publication of scientific outputs; and mechanisms for rapid assessment where required. Industry and other stakeholders could contribute data, scientific information, expertise and financial resources under appropriate safeguards, while procedures would be developed to protect the **independence and integrity of scientific assessments and conclusions**.

6 From concept to operational model

At this stage, the purpose of this discussion paper is to seek **AFRAF's consideration and endorsement of the concept and proposed functions of the African Food Risk Assessment Hub**, rather than to prescribe how the Hub should be operationalized. Decisions concerning its governance, hosting arrangements, coordination mechanisms, financing, expert participation, data infrastructure and implementation modalities should follow only once there is agreement on the value and intended role of the Hub.

Should AFRAF support the concept, a **subsequent operational paper** could be developed for consideration by AFRAF members. This paper would translate the concept into practical options and could examine alternative governance and hosting models; relationships with the three AFRAF Working Groups and existing national, REC and continental structures; mechanisms for mobilizing African expertise; priority scientific and capacity-building activities; data and digital infrastructure requirements; partnerships with international risk-assessment organizations and initiatives; and possible financing and sustainability arrangements.

As the current operator supporting AFRAF, **GFORSS could be tasked with coordinating the preparation of this subsequent paper**, in consultation with AFRAF members, the three Working Groups, African competent authorities, RECs and relevant technical and development partners. The exercise could also identify potential sources of funding and propose options for the longer-term sustainability of the initiative.

This approach would allow AFRAF to **first agree on the need, purpose and scope of the Hub**, before determining the most appropriate institutional and operational arrangements for its implementation.

7 Financing and sustainability considerations

The long-term sustainability of the African Food Risk Assessment Hub will be an important consideration in developing its operational model. At this stage, however, this discussion paper does not propose a specific financing mechanism. Should AFRAF endorse the concept, **financing and sustainability options should form an integral part of the subsequent operational paper**, including consideration of how the Hub can be developed without creating an excessive or unsustainable financial burden on participating regulatory authorities.

Potential options could include support from **development partners, continental and REC programmes, participating authorities and scientific or technical partners**, complemented by in-kind contributions such as expert time, access to datasets, laboratory and analytical capacities, scientific tools, software, training resources and institutional support.

The subsequent work could also examine whether certain activities may appropriately generate resources or operate on a **cost-recovery basis**. These could potentially include commissioned scientific assessments, safety assessments associated with food innovation or regulated products, specialized data analysis, tailored training and other technical services provided to public or private organizations. Any such mechanism would need appropriate safeguards to ensure that financing supports the **assessment process and scientific capacity of the Hub without influencing scientific conclusions**.

As part of developing the operational proposal, **GFORSS could be tasked with exploring potential funding opportunities and developing options for a sustainable financing model**, in consultation with AFRAF members and relevant partners. The objective would be to identify a diversified and practical resource base capable of supporting the Hub's public-interest functions while preserving **African regulatory ownership, scientific independence and long-term sustainability**.

8 Initial work programme for consideration by AFRAF

1. **Map the African risk-assessment ecosystem** – Identify competent-authority units, universities, laboratories, experts, existing REC initiatives, training programs and data assets by discipline and sub-region.
2. **Define an African competency framework** – Specify competencies for risk assessors and key specializations; map available courses against the framework; identify gaps; design mentoring and supervised-practice pathways.
3. **Create an initial expert roster and communities of practice** – Begin with chemical risk assessment, microbiological risk assessment, exposure assessment/data science and regulated-product/innovation safety assessment.
4. **Select 2–3 pilot scientific questions** – Choose questions with multi-country relevance and clear regulatory users—for example an occurrence/exposure issue, a microbiological risk question, and an innovative ingredient/product assessment. Use reliance on international assessments wherever possible.

5. **Develop the minimum data architecture** – Agree common metadata, quality and access principles; identify priority occurrence and consumption datasets; connect rather than duplicate existing repositories.
6. **Establish strategic partnerships incrementally** – Develop practical cooperation with African RECs, AFSA/AUC structures as they operationalize, ARSO, universities and laboratories, and international risk-assessment networks including xORA and EFSA-linked initiatives.
7. **Prepare a sustainability and hosting plan** – Invite expressions of interest from African competent authorities willing to shepherd the network; cost the minimum coordination function; identify public-good funding and service lines.

Conclusion

Africa does not need to reproduce every risk-assessment discipline in every authority, nor does AFRAF need to create another large institution. It needs a practical Hub that can connect expertise, develop people, organize access to data and tools, and mobilize credible scientific assessments when regulators require them. The African Food Risk Assessment Hub can provide that mechanism while remaining deliberately compatible with the future strengthening of AFSA, REC centres and national scientific capacities. Its initial mandate should remain focused on risk assessment. As experience, demand and governance mature, AFRAF may later consider whether selected functions should extend toward the broader risk analysis framework. Success should be measured by assessments completed, competencies demonstrated, data made usable, regulatory decisions better anchored in evidence, and African experts increasingly contributing to regional and international risk-assessment science.