



## Food safety in the face of climate change: consequences for consumers

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### ABSTRACT

Food safety encompasses the elimination of biological, chemical, and physical hazards along the food chain; however, climate change, an abnormal change in weather conditions, is a threat to food safety due to irregularities in the elements of weather essential for food production. Such factors include elevated atmospheric carbon (IV) oxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), precipitation, rainfall, and temperature. Considering that the aim of food safety is to eliminate food hazards along the food chain, it is threatened by climate change in several ways, resulting in adverse effects such as severe consequences for livestock production, harmful algal bloom, mycotoxins (produced by mycotoxigenic fungi on crops), residues of pesticides and tenacious contaminants, and pathogenic microorganisms from contaminated water. These climate changes include landslides and avalanches, drought and extreme heat waves, drought, heavy precipitation, flooding and tropical storms, ocean warming, climate change related acidification, and changes in ocean salinity. Therefore, there is a great need to employ adaptive strategies such as the establishment of a food safety management programme which would expound on the need to detect food hazards in food as a result of climate change. This programme should include setting up awareness for consumers, the improvement of epidemiological surveillance, improved co-ordination among food safety organizations, public health officials, and veterinary officials, amongst others. Thus, to achieve the sustainable development goal two, of eradicating hunger, it is imperative to harness the strategies for reducing the food safety hazards associated with climate change.

## Introduction

Food safety entails the conscious handling of food along its value chain, i.e. from production to preparation of food for consumption, in order to prevent contamination by biological (algae, bacteria, fungi, and parasites), chemical (additives, pesticides, microbial and plant toxins), and physical (fragments of stone, wood, and glass) hazards. The wholesomeness of food could be altered by these hazards, which contaminate food due to inadequacies in practices along its value chain, e.g. poor agricultural system, excessive application of

chemicals, storage technology and technique, and poor handler hygiene. The aforementioned hazards and causes of contamination have been addressed in several literature examples (Davidson et al., 2017; Garcia et al., 2020; Lafarga et al., 2019; Saiful, Khan & Kim, 2018) and solutions have been proffered on how to make food safe for consumers (Davidson et al., 2017; Garcia et al., 2020; Lafarga et al., 2019; Uçar et al., 2016). However, climate change is an evolving problem that can threaten global food safety. (FAO, 2010; Smith and Fazil, 2019; Uçar et al., 2016).

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Climate change, an abnormal change of the weather conditions caused by greenhouse gas emissions and several human activities, is an emerging stressor that is experienced over short periods and/or after a long period of time (Brown et al., 2015; Herrera et al., 2016). Living beings, from humans down to microscopic organisms, are affected by climate change. From the wildfires in Australia to the 'Arctic-like' levels of temperature in North America, abnormal has become the new normal. These natural disturbances have been shown to have severe impacts ranging from distortion of the properties of the ecosystem to the emergence of new patterns in the incidence of microorganisms in food, soil, and water (Coyle et al., 2017). Elements of the climate such as temperature, precipitation, and rainfall play an enormous role in the production of food. However, the unpredictable rainfall cycles, the increase in mean annual temperatures, the increase in atmospheric carbon (IV) oxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), and changes in precipitation patterns pose a big threat to various stages of the food chain (from production to consumption) (Uçar et al., 2016). Considering the alteration of ecosystems due to climate change and the possible emergence of new or adapted strains of food spoilage and virulent microorganisms (Tirado et al., 2010), the safety of food could therefore be at risk of "new" types of threats as a result of climate change.

Climate change, such as an irregular increase in temperatures (heat stress), has been shown to cause a significant direct impact on animal production, including their health, growth, and reproduction (Rust, 2019). Indirectly, the changes in the nutritional environment, such as the availability of livestock feeds and quantity and quality of livestock pastures and forage crops also affects animal production. Furthermore, climate change may affect the rate at which diseases and infections are transmitted between vertebrate animals and humans by increasing the transmission cycle of many vectors, as well as the range plus prevalence of vectors and animal reservoirs (Short et al., 2017). In addition, climate change may lead to the emergence of new zoonotic diseases due to the consumption of these animals by humans (FAO, 2010; Lake et al., 2012).

Likewise, climatic change encourages eutrophication (excessive nutrients like nitrogen and phosphorus in lakes, streams, and oceans), causing the growth of phytoplankton and increasing the frequencies of toxigenic algal bloom (Neil et al., 2012). The accumulation of these toxins by filter feeders such as molluscs can have severe health implications like paralytic shellfish poisoning,

neurotoxic shellfish poisoning, and diarrhoeic shellfish poisoning of humans after consumption (Lake and Barker, 2018).

Another impact of climate change is the possible increase in infectious diseases, especially food and waterborne diseases, owing to the fact that foodborne pathogens are usually influenced by climate and weather variables (Lake, 2017; Smith and Fazil, 2019). Changes in the pattern of temperature, humidity, and rainfall aid the transmission of diseases (food and water-borne diseases) from contaminated crops and water to humans, likewise, extreme weather conditions such as flooding, drought, and hurricanes can affect the availability and quality of water (Miraglia et al., 2009). Correspondingly, climate change can have potential impacts on the microbial evolution and stress response, the emergence of pathogens and the proliferation of toxigenic fungi, thereby endangering human health (Thomas, 2017).

Therefore, it is imperative to ensure adaptive approaches that will mitigate the risks posed by climate change are implemented.

#### *Interplay between climate change and food safety*

Climate change is likely to have considerable impacts on food safety, both direct and indirect, placing consumers' health at risk (Lake and Barker, 2018). The pathways through which climate related factors may influence food safety include the change in temperature and precipitation patterns, increased frequency and intensity of extreme weather events, landslides and avalanches, ocean warming and acidification, and changes in the transport pathways of complex contaminants (Tirado et al., 2010). A summary of the factors and the hazards they pose to food safety is highlighted in Table 1.

The increase in temperature and changes in the patterns of rainfall have a considerable impact on the persistence and patterns of occurrence of bacteria, viruses, and parasites, as well as the toxins they produce and their corresponding foodborne illnesses. Additionally, extreme weather conditions such as flooding, drought, and hurricanes can exacerbate the transmission of foodborne pathogens and contaminants to humans. For example, excessive periods of precipitation, floods, and droughts can influence the availability and quality of water and the contamination of soils with heavy metals and pesticides (Boddy et al., 2016; Cissé, 2019; FAO, 2010; Lake and Barker, 2018; Miraglia et al., 2009; Rajkumar et al., 2013; van der Spiegel et al., 2012). The impact of climate change has been

observed in the transmission of foodborne diseases such as cholera, campylobacteriosis, listeriosis, and salmonellosis globally (FAO, 2010; Herrera et al., 2016). For example, a study in Canada deduced that increased air and sea surface temperature, high precipitation, and flooding resulted in the increased burden of *Campylobacter* spp, *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Salmonella* spp, *Vibrio parahaemolyticus*, *Vibrio vulnificus* and *Escherichia coli* 0157:H7 (Smith and Fazil, 2019; Hellberg and Chu, 2015).

Moreover, increased temperature, drought, and increased CO<sub>2</sub> can have an enormous impact on the shift of mycotoxigenic fungi and the production of mycotoxins, thereby creating an increase in toxin accumulation in infested agri-food products. In particular, increased temperature and drought conditions could favour the infestation of crops by *Aspergillus flavus* in some regions and increase the risk of aflatoxin formation in the field and post field (Assunção et al., 2018; Medina et al., 2017a,b; Paterson & Lima, 2011; Rajkumar et al., 2013; Kovač et al., 2020a,b; Ayeni et al., 2020). Moreover, elevated CO<sub>2</sub> is likely to contribute to and enhance fungal colonization by *Aspergillus* and *Fusarium* species, thus increasing the production of mycotoxins in food crops. Additionally, the combined occurrence of drought and heat stress can have several effects between crops and fungal pathogens and endophytes that ranges from a shift in mycotoxigenic fungi and mycotoxins to severe plant stress. For example, in Northern Italy, in 2003, 2004 and 2012, it was discovered that the prolonged drought conditions and extreme elevated temperatures (> 35 °C) resulted in stressed maize plants that were more prone to fungal infestations and the conditions were conducive for a switch from *Fusarium verticillioides* and fumonisins to the contamination of maize grains with *A. flavus* and aflatoxins (Giorni et al., 2007; Medina et al., 2017b). Considering the economic and health impacts of mycotoxin contamination in food crops, infestation of food crops with mycotoxigenic fungi due to climate change is a threat to food safety (Kovač et al., 2018).

#### *Consequences of the interplay between climate change and food safety on consumers' health*

The food safety hazards posed by climate change have several implications for human health. These implications include foodborne illnesses and diseases, emergence of zoonotic diseases, malnutrition, under-nutrition and stunted growth from alteration of nutrients in contaminated crops, mycotoxicoses, hepatocellular carcinoma, respiratory and digestive problems, seizures, lesions

and skin irritation, fatalities in fish, mammals, and humans, and possibly death from inadequate food supply.

1. According to the WHO, about 600 million people in the world have fallen ill as a result of ingestion of contaminated foods, while about 420,000 die annually due to the same cause (WHO, 2018). Owing to this statistic, climate change could exacerbate the transmission of food- and water-borne pathogens such as *Escherichia coli*, *Staphylococcus aureus*, *Helicobacter pylori*, *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, *Bacillus subtilis*, *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Toxoplasma gondii*, *Vibrio cholerae*, *Shigella flexneri*, *Mycobacterium bovis*, *Campylobacter jejuni*, *Clostridium difficile*, *Yersinia enterocolitica*, *Bacillus cereus*, *Clostridium botulinum*, and rotavirus, causing an increase in foodborne illnesses and diseases (FAO, 2010; Lake and Barker, 2018).
2. Furthermore, due to climate change, infections and diseases can occur from zoonotic agents like the Rift Valley fever virus (in multiple species of livestock and wildlife), the Nipah virus (bats and pigs), the Hendra virus (bats and horses), the Hantavirus (rodents), and the Lassa fever virus (FAO, 2010).
3. Additionally, the uptake of algal toxins such as microcystin can target the liver cells, causing great damage to the liver as well as the eye and upper tract respiratory tract irritation, rash, and gastrointestinal infections (Anderson, 2019; Gible, Peacock and Kudela, 2016).
4. Moreover, exposure to mycotoxins like aflatoxins, citrinin, fumonisins, ochratoxins, and beauvericin in crops can cause diverse health effects that range from cancer (especially hepatocellular carcinoma and human esophageal cancer) to stunted growth, mutagenicity, and neural tube birth defects in new-borns whose mothers were exposed during pregnancy (Munkvold et al., 2018; Wielogorska et al., 2019; Wu and Santella, 2012).

#### *Strategies to ensure food safety despite the uncontrollable climate change*

Food safety is threatened by several risks posed by climate change and it has been speculated that responding to climate change will be one of the greatest issues of the century. Hence, the management of the risk is highly recommended to avoid unpredicted circumstances such as worldwide foodborne disease outbreak (IPCC, 2019).

**Table 1.** Food safety risks posed by climate change

| Natural disasters caused by climate change   | Objects targeted                       | Environmental effects  | Food safety risks  | References   |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| Landslides and avalanches  | Landfills, dams, rivers                | Contamination of surface water and agricultural land with contaminants deposited by mud from landslides.   | Contamination of water and soils by pathogenic organisms, including <i>Campylobacter</i> spp, <i>Listeria monocytogenes</i> , <i>Salmonella</i> spp, <i>Vibrio parahaemolyticus</i> , <i>Vibrio vulnificus</i> and <i>Escherichia coli</i> 0157:H7, crops are grown on contaminated soils posing a huge risk to consumers.   | (Geertsema, Highland, & Vaugeouis, 2009; Marvin et al., 2013; Smith and Fazil, 2019; Hellberg and Chu, 2015) |
| Drought and heat waves   | Crops, animals                         | Severe change in temperature can lead to the proliferation of mycotoxigenic fungi belonging to the genus <i>Aspergillus</i> , <i>Fusarium</i> , <i>Penicillium</i> , and talaromyces. Increased temperature can change the pattern of grazing in livestock. Severe aridity can reduce soil microorganisms. | Production of mycotoxins such as aflatoxins, fumonisins, ochratoxins, and beauvericin that could lead to mycotoxicoses. Greater exposure of animals to vectors and wildlife. Increase in animal diseases that can lead to increased use of veterinary drugs, especially antibiotics, thereby promoting resistance. Increased veterinary drug residues in meat from livestock. Soil microorganisms such as <i>Rhizobium</i> will reduce in soil, affecting Nitrogen fixation. | (FAO, 2010; Lesnikowski et al., 2013; A. Medina et al., 2017a; Moretti et al., 2014)                         |
| Floods and tropical storms   | Agricultural lands in flood plains     | Contamination of agricultural and pasture land due to the deposits of flood water containing contaminants like pesticide residues and heavy metals.  | Uptake of contaminants by crops grown on the contaminated lands. Bioaccumulation of chemical contaminants in humans and animals that consume the contaminated crops.   | (FAO, 2010; Miraglia et al., 2009; Wan et al., 2019)   |
| Heavy precipitation  | Freshwater animals and irrigated crops | Contact with freshwater containing runoff with pathogens, contaminants, and nutrients caused by heavy precipitation.   | Contamination of irrigated crops with pathogens and contaminants. Infection of freshwater animals with pathogens.  | (Bouzembrak and Marvin, 2019; Marvin et al., 2013)   |
| Ocean warming and climate change related acidification, change in ocean salinity and precipitation | Marine and estuarine habitat.          | Changes in the biochemical properties of water and water microflora, distortion of the distribution of fisheries and the metabolic rate of fish, changes in the occurrence of pathogenic <i>Vibrio species</i> , harmful algal bloom and chemical contaminants in fish and shell fish.                     | Human illnesses such as amnesic shellfish poisoning, diarrhoeic shellfish poisoning, neurotoxin shellfish poisoning, paralytic shellfish poisoning, and ciguatera fish poisoning could be the result of consumption of seafood animals.  | (Cavicchioli et al., 2019; Tirado et al., 2010)  |

Therefore, it is very important to employ food safety management programs like One Health that harness experts on food safety, public health, animal health, plant health and environment to mitigate the consequences of climate change (Garcia et al., 2020). In addition, improving the capacity to detect and to control rising foodborne hazards at all phases of the food chain will require efforts in various sectors, including the application of new scientific methods and tools that will be helpful in the characterization of complex microbial communities.

Furthermore, creating awareness by food safety and environment experts on adapting to climatic change along the food value chain will be helpful. Food organizations should ensure that consumers are properly informed on the effects of climate change on food safety by creating awareness in the media. Likewise, awareness programs should be set up by food production companies in collaboration with the WHO and the FAO for the consumers of their products, explaining meticulously the foodborne risks

and hazards of the consumption of contaminated products (WHO, 2018).

Furthermore, there is a need to employ novel epidemiological surveillance that will help in early recognition of materializing food and water borne diseases. There should be rapid investigations of unusual outbreaks, alongside environmental investigation, to determine if the outbreaks are associated with climate change. Universal approach to epidemiological surveillance should be taken, since humans do not respect the boundaries (climate change). Also, public health organizations should be quick to mobilize and acknowledge emerging and resurfacing diseases of infectious origin (Calzadilla et al., 2013).

Likewise, there is a great need for enhancing the communication amongst health professionals, veterinary doctors, and environmental health workers, to provide valuable prediction and mitigation impact of climate change on infectious diseases, particularly foodborne diseases. The combined effect of each health officer will lead to a more productive solution

for the global challenge (climate change) (Lake and Barker, 2018).

Lastly, the protection of the ecosystem is strongly advised, because this helps in the management of the risk to the barest minimum. This could be done by the protection of coastal areas from cyclones and other coastal hazards, the preservation of mangroves and their contribution to coastal fisheries, the use of degraded or marginal lands for productive planted forests or other cellulose biomass for alternative fuels, watershed protection; prevention of land degradation and conservation (WHO, 2018).

## Conclusion

The environmental effects of climate change may have a colossal impact on the incidence and the types of hazards contaminating food, considering the alteration of the human and microbial ecosystems. Therefore, there is a vital need to employ awareness programmes on the impact of climate change on food safety, epidemiological surveillance to ascertain to what extent changes have occurred in the behaviour of microorganisms, and the use of eco-friendly technologies in view of protecting the environment and ensuring consumer health. Employing these aforementioned strategies will help in mitigating the several consequences of climate change on food safety.

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