

18th Annual Meeting (AM) of the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Working Group on Agriculture (WGA)

Summary of Discussion

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In association with Berkeley Economic Advising and Research



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Report submitted by:

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Asian Development Bank

Acronyms

ACFS	Agricultural Commodity and Food Standards (Thailand)
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AMS	ASEAN Member States
API	application programming interface
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
BRC	British Retail Consortium
CCIC	China Certification and Inspection Group
EPCIS	electronic product code information services
FSQ	Food Safety and Quality
GMS	Greater Mekong Subregion
IPSARD	Institute for Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (Vietnam)
MAF	Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry (Lao, PDR)
MAFF	Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (Cambodia)
MAMRASCA	Multilateral Arrangement for the Mutual Recognition of Agri-food Standards and Conformity Assessment
MARA	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (People's Republic of China)
MARD	Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (Vietnam)
NGO	Non-government Organization
NSTDA	National Science and Technology Development Agency (Thailand),
NTB	Non-tariff barrier
PRC	People's Republic of China
SAFSP	Greater Mekong Subregion Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security Program
SDG	Sustainable Development Goals
SEARCA	Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture
SOM-AMAF	Senior Officer Meeting - ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture and Forestry
SPS	Sanitary and Phytosanitary
STAMEQ	Standard Metrology and Quality of Vietnam (Vietnam);
TA	Technical Assistance
USD	United States Dollar
WFP	World Food Programme
WGA	Working Group in Agriculture

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Executive Summary

1. The 18th Annual Meeting of the GMS Working Group on Agriculture was held on 7 – 8 July 2021 and featured the theme of: “Achieving Agri-food Safety and Quality Harmonization and Traceability in the Greater Mekong Subregion in the context of COVID-19 and Climate Change.” The objectives of the annual meeting include; (i) to share national priorities of GMS countries for reinvigorating the agri-food sector in the context of COVID-19 and climate change; (ii) to assess how the ASEAN Multilateral Arrangement for the Mutual Recognition of Agri-food Standards and Conformity Assessment can be utilized to facilitate GMS agri-food trade in the GMS and beyond; and (iii) to agree upon priority actions to support harmonized FSQ standards and digitization to enhance agri-food trade in the GMS and beyond.
2. The annual meeting was attended by the Greater Mekong Subregion (GMS) Working Group in Agriculture (WGA) coordinators and representatives, technical department representatives from all GMS Ministries of Agriculture and other related ministries (environment, science and technology, health, planning and finance), development partner representatives, resource persons from the academia and private sector, officers and staff of the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the Regional Technical Assistance (TA) 9916 Greater Mekong Subregion Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security Program (SAFSP) TA team.
3. The meeting progressed with representatives from the GMS countries presenting their priorities alongside the themes of the annual meeting. Resource speakers and panel members from the government, academia, private sector, and development partners were invited to share their experiences and insights on the current developments in food safety and quality (FSQ) value chains and how various governments, smallholder farmers, the private sector are addressing the challenges the beset the sector such as climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic. The ASEAN Secretariat representative, Dr. Pham Quang Minh presented the details of ASEAN Multilateral Arrangement for the Mutual Recognition of Agri-food Standards and Conformity Assessment (MAMRASCA) and experts from the various ministries of the GMS reacted to the possibility of ASEAN GMS countries transforming into early adopters of the MAMRASCA as an initial step in harmonizing agri-food standards within the GMS. The Asian Development Bank also presented the key priorities and expected outputs of TA 9916 as it addresses food safety harmonization and traceability initiatives in the GMS that can be aided by digitization.
4. The following is an unexhaustive list of key discussion points:
 - i. There was a consensus among the representatives of the GMS countries that advances on GMS cooperation in agriculture will need to rely on a very strong foundation of harmonization of agri-food safety and quality standard. With MAMRASCA, there is a clear possibility that the GMS countries can expand harmonization of trade.
 - ii. The development of pilots, supporting capacity development while recognizing the role of the private sector and the use of digitization technologies can help address the bottlenecks that the GMS countries face in using MAMRASCA as a means to expand harmonization of trade.
 - iii. The private sector has a very important role to play in the FSQ initiatives and harmonization of trade as they bring with them the know-how, the technology and the knowledge of the markets. The public sector plays a key role in broadening the general understanding of good agricultural practices, policy regulatory framework, compliance, clear procedures, and cross-border processes. Businesses must be empowered to enable them to adequately impose FSQ management. Smallholder farmers must be engaged, trained and empowered to be able to

contribute to the economies intended to shift to good agricultural practices and promote food safety quality standards.

iv. Everyone was encouraged to think about inclusivity in terms of smallholders, women and vulnerable populations and ensure that all these stakeholders are benefiting from improved FSQ practices. With that, the GMS will not only contribute to the recovery from Covid-19 but also the achievement of sustainable development goals and address climate change.

5. TA 9916 experts proposed to form an experts' task force composed of a small group of key experts from the ministries. This task force was envisioned to have an accelerator role in food safety and quality and digital transformation to help develop safe, sustainable, climate-friendly, pro-poor, and women-friendly value chains. However, the majority of WGA coordinators expressed their hesitation to create another technical group at the moment. Dr. Srinivasan Ancha (ADB) concluded to hold off the institution of the said task force. In place of the task force, the ministries of agriculture will be assisted in their regional cooperation and trade harmonization efforts through the engagements of experts as and when needed.

6. The adopted meeting agenda read as follows (see Annex 1 for meeting agenda):

- I. **Welcome Remarks** – Given by Rapibhat Chandarasrivongs, Deputy Permanent Secretary / WGA Coordinator, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Thailand and Mr. Jiangfeng Zhang, Director, Environment, Natural Resource & Agriculture Division, Southeast Asia Department, ADB
- II. Representatives from the GMS countries (except Myanmar) presented their Priorities for Reinvigorating the GMS Agri-food Sector in the Context of COVID-19 and Climate Change - Cambodia was represented by H.E. Dr. Prum Somany, Advisor to the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF); People's Republic of China (PRC) was represented by Ms. Liu Xiangzhou, Level 4 Investigator, Division of Asian and African Affairs, Department of International Cooperation, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA) and Ms. Zhang Bin, Associate Researcher, Asia Regional Cooperation Division / WGA Focal Point, Foreign Economic Cooperation Center, MARA; Lao PDR was represented by Dr. Thatsaka Saphangthong, Director General, Department of Policy and Legal Affairs / WGA Coordinator, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry; Thailand was represented by Mrs. Benjawan Siribhodi, Expert on International Agricultural Economics Policy, Office of Agricultural Economics, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives; and Vietnam was represented by Mr. Nguyen Do Anh Tuan, Director General, International Cooperation Department/ WGA Coordinator, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development.
- III. **Session 1: Agri-food safety and quality harmonization keynote presentation** was given by Dr. Pham Quang Minh, Head of Food, Agriculture and Forestry Division, ASEAN Economic Community Department, ASEAN Secretariat. His presentation was followed by a panel discussion facilitated by Mr. Suriyan Vichitlekarn, Executive Director, Mekong Institute, Thailand and participated by Ms. Lin Jing, Chinese Academy of Customs Administration, Vice President, PRC; Dr. Thavisith Bounyasouk, Director of Clean Agriculture Standard Center, Department of Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Lao PDR; Dr. Nguyen Anh Phong, Director, Institute for Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD), Viet Nam; Dr. Ker Monthivuth, Director, Plant Protection, Sanitary and Phytosanitary Department, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), Cambodia; and Dr. Virachnee Lohachoompol, Standards Officer, Senior Professional Level, National Bureau of Agricultural Commodity and Food Standards (ACFS), Thailand.

- IV. Session 2: Role of the Private Sector in the Harmonization of Agri-food Standards on Safety and Quality with keynote presentations given by Mr. Chusak Chuenprayoth, Chairman, KCfresh, Thailand (vegetable exporter to Europe) and Dr. Phuwakji Rungtiwakornkij, Managing Director, The Big Trading, (fruit exporter to PRC). It was followed by a panel discussion facilitated by Mr. Suriyan Vichitlekarn and participated by Natcha Sikaewnamsai, Senior Operations Manager, Food Service, Intertek Thailand; Mr. Chen Qisheng, General Manager, China Certification and Inspection Group (CCIC) Cambodia Inc.; Dr. William Chen, Director, Food Science & Technology, Programme, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore; Mrs. Sharmeen Khan, Chief Marketing Officer, OpsSmart, USA
 - V. **Session 3: Implementing Food Safety Harmonization and Traceability Initiatives in the GMS** was conducted with presentations from Vichelle Roaring-Arunsuwannakorn, TA 9916 Food Safety & Quality Specialist and Pier Paolo Ficarelli, TA 9916 Digital Agriculture & Innovation Specialist. It was followed by a panel discussion facilitated by Stewart Pittaway, TA 9916 Team Leader and participated by Dr. Suporn Pongnumkul, Senior Researcher, National Electronics and Computer Engineering Center, National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA), Thailand; Mr. Wonganan Sukcharoenkana, Mae Klong Distribution Company Limited and Choke Anan Farm; Mr. Do Hoang Phuong, Director of the Global Food JST company; Mr. Sayakone Onnaly, General Manager, CPC, Lao PDR, (climate-friendly agriculture and export trade); Mr. Bui Ba Chinh, Executive Manager of GS1 Vietnam-MOST Directorate of Standard Metrology and Quality of Vietnam (STAMEQ); and Arvind Betigeri, Regional Rice Fortification, World Food Programme.
 - VI. **Day 1 conclusion** was delivered by Vichelle Roaring-Arunsuwannakorn and Pier Paolo Ficarelli.
 - VII. Day 2 presentation 1: GMS Task Force on Food Safety and Quality and Digital Technologies was given by Vichelle Roaring-Arunsuwannakorn followed by feedback and discussion
 - VIII. **Draft WGA Annual Meeting Statement** was presented by Dr. Srinivasan Ancha Principal Climate Change Specialist, Asian Development Bank who also led the discussion on the adoption of the statement.
 - IX. Final expression of GMS WGA representatives
 - X. **Summary of the meeting** was presented by Dr. Srinivansan Ancha
 - XI. **Concluding remarks** were given by Dr. Jiangfeng Zhang, Director, Environment, Natural Resource & Agriculture Division, Southeast Asia Department, ADB and Mr. Rapibhat Chandarasrivongs, Deputy Permanent Secretary / WGA Coordinator, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives
7. The 18th Annual Meeting was held virtually and was hosted by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Thailand with support from the Asian Development Bank through the Technical Assistance (TA) 9916 being implemented by Landell Mills group of experts and consultants. The master of ceremonies was Ms. Kristine Reyes.

1. Introduction

1.1. Welcome Remarks

8. In his welcome remarks, Mr. Rapibhat Chandarasrivongs, Thailand, welcomed all GMS delegates and participants. He mentioned that Thailand is pleased to share experiences on the projects on climate change adaptation for agriculture for enhanced recovery and sustainability in Nan province and for this, he also thanked the ADB for the support. He offered the possibility of using this project as one of the demonstration areas for climate-smart water management, climate adaptive soil and crop management and digital agriculture technology-based farm to fork traceability solution for organic agriculture products. Mr. Chandarasrivongs, with the view of the upcoming UN Food System Summit, emphasized the importance of food systems in advancing agricultural development in the GMS. He said that maintaining a functional food system, being the entry point to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), must adopt multisectoral and interagency cooperation. He invited everyone to form a collective wisdom and action in taking functional food systems further starting from developing food system support in the region by (i) sharing experiences among the GMS nations their national and subnational levels on food system management; and (ii) creating a GMS-wide framework on reviewing regional issues and challenges to food systems and on addressing these challenges (e.g., on transboundary concerns over animal and plant diseases, etc). As the GMS Economic Cooperation Program embarks in adopting a new Strategic Framework 2030 it is important for the WGA to understand the interlinkage of agriculture with broader trade integration and how agriculture will be affected by the change in ecosystems, opportunities and challenges from the highspeed train rail link from Kunming, China to Vientiane Lao, PDR, and the agro-logistics along the economic corridors. He noted that Thailand is ready to partner with neighbors who are interested to work with the nation. He said that Thailand, in consultation with the rest of the GMS countries and in cooperation with Mekong Institute and other development partners, is developing a concept note to specify the details of closer cooperation among the GMS countries. Moreover, wider agriculture best practices have been developed under MAMRASCA. Thailand encourages participation from regional and national levels. Mr. Chandarasrivongs closed his remarks by wishing for everyone's safety and health as the world moves towards the new normal (*post Covid-19*).

9. Mr. Jiangfeng Zhang (ADB) also gave welcome remarks and opened with greetings to the honored officers and members of the WGA, speakers, representatives from government agencies, participants from research organizations, development partners and the private sector. He thanked the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives Thailand for co-hosting the 18th Annual Meeting. He noted that the theme of the annual meeting was timely as it touched three challenges, namely: (i) safe and high-quality food systems; (ii) Covid-19; and (iii) climate change. The annual meeting also considers three opportunities to address the challenges of (i) mutual recognition and harmonization of regional and international food safety and quality standards; (ii) digitization for traceability of agri-food products; and (iii) effective collaboration between the governments and the private sector. Food-borne diseases caused by chemicals, viruses, bacteria and parasites cause death for hundreds of thousands of people annually yet food safety and quality has not received the attention of policy makers that it deserves. He expressed pride over the efforts of the GMS Agriculture Ministers in realizing the importance of these issues in September 2017 well ahead of the UN General Assembly's decision to declare the World Food Safety Day on 7 June 2018. GMS Agriculture Ministers enthused the strategy for the promotion of safe and environment-friendly agro-value chains and the Seam Reap action plan. He said that this meeting and the associated ADB regional technical assistance (TA) 9916 – Greater Mekong Subregion Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security Program (SAFSP) are part of the wider range of efforts to implement that strategy. He also pointed that the Covid-19 pandemic, a global concern that has elevated consumer concerns over food safety, encouraged the widespread adoption of good hygiene practices. It also has potential to undermine GMS economies' efforts from achieving the SDGs. As food safety and quality are

linked directly and indirectly in achieving the SDGs especially those on ending hunger and poverty and promoting good health and wellbeing and many other SDGs including economic growth, innovation, responsible consumption and protection and climate action, he highlighted the need to take advantage of the heightened awareness over food safety and quality in the front and center of efforts in achieving SDGs. Climate change is another global challenge and has several impacts on food safety and quality, e.g., changes in precipitation are expected to affect the geographic distribution and persistence of food-borne pathogens and parasites. He also said food safety and quality of food systems are the results of actions or inactions of stakeholders (farmers, food handlers and distributors, food manufacturers, food service operators, consumers, regulators, researchers, educators and the media) operating in the diverse environmental infrastructure and sociopolitical conditions. He suggested to use as leverage the heightened awareness over food safety and quality to shift the behavior of the stakeholders. A judicious mix of regulation, dedication, participation in public and private investments from farm to fork is critical to adjust food safety and quality in the context of Covid-19 and climate change. Improving food safety and quality in GMS countries requires sustained investments in several areas including stronger regulations, better laboratories, more stringent surveillance and better training and education. He said that the annual meeting is a great opportunity to listen to GMS countries' perspectives on adjusting food safety and quality standards in the context of Covid-19 and climate change. This discussion will be followed by a session on how GMS country governments can make use of ASEAN multilateral arrangement for the Mutual Recognition of Agri-food Standards and Conformity Assessment (MAMRASCA). The role of private sector investments and digitization issues will also be discussed. He closed his remarks by encouraging all participants to share their experiences and understand better the problems and identify solutions to enhance food safety and quality while addressing the impacts of Covid-19 and climate change. He encouraged the participants to utilize the event as an opportunity to create strong networks within the GMS and between sectors in the spirit of building a foundation for investing in food safety and quality in a sustainable way in national and regional situations. He wished the annual meeting success.

1.2. Priorities for Reinvigorating the GMS Agri-food Sector in the Context of COVID-19 and Climate Change – Presentations by WGA Representatives

10. H.E. Dr. Prum Somany, Advisor to the Minister of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF), Director, Department of International Cooperation, MAFF, Cambodia gave the first statement of representatives. He first greeted Mr. Rapibhat Chandaravongs, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Thailand and Mr. Jianfeng Zhang, Director, Environment, Natural Resources & Agriculture Division, Southeast Asia Department, ADB and all the participants of the annual meeting. On behalf of Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of the Kingdom of Cambodia he expressed appreciation to the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperative of the Kingdom of Thailand and ADB for the support and excellent arrangement of the annual meeting of GMS Working Group on Agriculture.

11. He recalled that the strategies for promoting safe and environmentally friendly agro-based value chains in the GMS and Siem Reap Action Plan were endorsed by the GSM Ministers of Agriculture during the 13th GMS Agriculture Ministers Meeting which was held in September 2017 in Siem Reap, Cambodia. This relates to the annual meeting's common purpose to discuss the possible and practical ways to accelerate the implementation of this strategy and action plan and to discuss the way forward in achieving agri-food safety and quality harmonization in the GMS in the context of COVID-19 and climate change. The COVID-19 outbreak has affected all sectors in Cambodia either directly or indirectly. The downfall of tourism, the losses due to the shut down of industry and factories affected the economy as a whole. Further, border closures, travel restrictions, and school closures have negatively affected the economic growth and national revenue of Cambodia.

12. Internal and external factors associated with COVID-19 have an impact on the agricultural supply chain, affecting input suppliers, producers, collectors, processors and consumers. Food supply and

demand market and business have been disrupted. In response to this situation and in order to reinvigorate the agri-food sector in context of the pandemic, the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF) of the Kingdom of Cambodia has identified priorities and put them into an action plan for implementation, including:

- I. MAFF joined FAO in conducting an assessment on the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the agriculture sector and coming up with policy recommendations identifying short-term, medium-term measure and long-term response measures.
- II. Beside further development of supporting policy and strategy, MAFF has been improving and promoting the safety and quality of agri-food produce and products through the application of GAP, GAHP, GAqP, CAMGAP, CAM Organic as well as PGS.
- III. MAFF has been mobilizing financial and technical support from the government as well as development partners to upgrade the agri-food associated laboratories.
- IV. In the context of Climate Change, MAFF has placed more efforts on (1) Mobilization of resources for research and development of climate and disease resilient and improvement of high yield crops variety and livestock species; (2) Implementing Climate Smart Agriculture techniques and technologies including promoting greenhouses and drip irrigation application, etc; and (3)-Developing digitalization in the agriculture sector.

13. Moreover, Cambodia will also work in collaboration with other GMS countries for enhancing sustainable agriculture and food safety and defining challenges, and priorities, especially discussing how to achieve agri-food safety and quality harmonization in the GMS.

14. Dr. Somany then expressed his strong belief that the annual meeting will be concluded with fruitful results, provide a good mechanism and modality for future implementation with technical assistance from the SAFSP and for the betterment of the GMS' agriculture sector. He closed his remarks by thanking the Royal Government of Thailand, in general of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperative, in particular as well as ADB and the organizing committee for the warm welcome and excellent arrangement for the virtual meeting.

15. Ms. Liu Xiangzhou, Level 4 Investigator (Deputy Director level), Division of Asian and African Affairs, Department of International Cooperation, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (MARA) and Ms. Zhang Bin, WGA Focal Point, Associate Researcher, Asia Regional Cooperation Division, Foreign Economic Cooperation Centre, MARA represented the PRC. Ms. Liu Xiangzhou introduced herself and invited Ms. Zhang Bin to deliver PRC's country presentation on Priorities for Reinvigorating the GMS Agri-food Sector in the Context of COVID-19 and Climate Change (please see Annex 2 for the copy of the presentation).

16. Ms. Zhang Bin emphasized the importance of reinvigorating the GMS Agri-food Sector amid COVID-19 and climate change and outlined the presentation into 3 parts: (1) Achievement and Status quo of PRC Agri-food Sector; (2) Outlook and Priorities; (3) Recommendations in response to the impact of COVID-19 and climate change

17. In 2020, PRC's achievements in the Agri-food Sector were mainly in 5 aspects: (1) food security - the grain production has achieved "17 consecutive harvests" and has been stable at more than 0.65 trillion kg for six consecutive years, and the production capacity for live pigs production has returned to the normal level; (2) poverty alleviation - under the current standards, all the rural poor people have been lifted out of poverty (including 832 former poor counties and 128,000 former poor villages); (3) agricultural modernization and sustainability - the contribution rate of agricultural science and technology advancement has exceeded 60%, the comprehensive mechanization rate of farming and harvesting has reached 71%, the application of chemical fertilizers and pesticides has been negatively increased for 4 consecutive years, the comprehensive utilization rate of livestock and poultry manure has exceeded 75%,

the 10-year ban on fishing in Yangzi River has started to be fully implemented, and positive progress has been made in agricultural green development; (4) the development of rural industry: new industries and business formats in the rural area are booming and the national agri-food processing business income has reached 3.63 trillion USD and the rural online retail sales has reached 27.9 million USD; (5) smallholder farmers' livelihood: almost all villages have access to national grid, hardened roads, and 4G networks and the per capita disposable income of rural residents reached 2,677 USD. These achievements have built a solid foundation for supporting a well-off society in a well-rounded way.

18. Ms. Zhang Bin highlighted that 2021 is a year to build on the past and is the starting year of China's 14th 5-year plan. In response to Covid-19 and climate change, China's agri-food sector needs to be reinvigorated at this critical time when both opportunities and challenges exist. The current WGA annual meeting has important guiding significance. She expressed that in 2021, it is expected that China's capacity to ensure supply of grain and key agri-food is expected to be further enhanced; Chinese people's access to daily food to be absolutely secured and the planting of maize and production of pork will be increased. In the next 5 years, the structure of China's agri-food sector will continue to be optimized, and the quality and efficiency of the sector development will be constantly improved. The annual increase rate of output of major agri-food (maize, pork and dairy products, etc.) will be more than 2%. The international trade of agri-food will be more active and trade partners will be more diversified. In 2021 the structural supply side will be further promoted, food safety and quality will be further improved, the income of farmers will continue to grow faster than that of urban residents and achievements in poverty alleviation will be consolidated.

19. Ms. Zhang Bin then introduced the overall target for reinvigorating China's agri-food sector by 2025: the agricultural foundation to be more stable, the supply of food and important agricultural products to be more secure, agricultural production structure and layout to be optimized, agricultural quality, efficiency and competitiveness to be improved, modern rural industrial system to be formed, and regions meeting conditions to be the first to realize agricultural modernization. In addition, the results of poverty alleviation will be consolidated and expanded and the income gap between urban and rural residents will continue to narrow. Positive progress observed in green production is aimed to be consolidated and expanded, and the income gap between urban and rural residents will continue to narrow. Positive progress has been made in the green transformation of rural production and lifestyle.

20. The priority for the country is to implement the rural revitalization strategy to accelerate the development of a rural modern industrial system and establishment of modern agricultural management system, and promote the development of urban and rural integration.

21. After the outbreak of Covid-19, China's agriculture sector has encountered challenges in the agricultural product logistics and distribution system given the agricultural production sales were more concentrated in off-line market transactions, the agricultural product quality distribution system was not complete, etc. However, it also ushered development opportunities for new sales models of agriculture products.

22. Finally, Ms. Zhang Bin made 3 recommendations: (1) actively develop specialty agricultural products and build well-known brands; (2) cultivate new agricultural business entities and promote industrialized management; and (3) strengthen the establishment of agricultural product traceability system and form a closed loop of quality management.

23. She also thanked ADB for starting TA 9916 and asked that Yunnan and Guangxi will have demonstration projects and other activities under the TA. She expressed China's willingness to share experience with the GMS region.

24. Dr. Thatsaka Saphangthong, Director General, Department of Policy and Legal Affairs, Ministry of Agriculture, Lao PDR / WGA Coordinator, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, on behalf of the Lao

Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, congratulated the progress made so far especially, the inception report and the workplan of the GMS SAFSP which fits well with our vision for the implementation of quality and productivity for enhancing the food security and nutrition in the country

25. Due to impacts from COVID-19, economic growth has slowed down and agricultural activities and supply chains in the region were disrupted. In Laos, it was estimated that the number of people facing increasing agri-food insecurity will be high in the next few years.

26. In response to the impact, the government of Laos focuses on, firstly, supporting the implementation of programs under the agriculture development strategy to promote food security and food safety; second, increasing agricultural commodity production for ensuring domestic consumption and export; and third, promoting the establishment of agricultural production with financial support and promoting package for SMEs.

27. The activities under this program that are valuable to Lao PDR include the outputs of livestock traceability assessment and baseline assessment for crop safety and quality. These will significantly contribute to food security and economic growth in Lao PDR. MAF is looking forward to supporting the implementation of the program.

28. The Director General expressed gratitude to the host of the WGA Annual Meeting and to ADB for its support and wished everyone a fruitful meeting.

29. Mrs. Benjawan Saphangthong, Expert on international agricultural economics policies, Office of agricultural economics, Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Thailand gave her presentation. She noted that the Covid-19 outbreak has hurt the global as well as the Thai economies and affected every sector in the economy including agriculture. She expressed a desire to share the Covid-19 responsive recovery in Thailand. Due to Covid-19, lockdown measures were implemented in varying degrees throughout the country. The pandemic has heavily disrupted the Thai economy, especially tourism which in turn affected other sectors like agriculture in the following manner: (i) the transfer of agriculture and food commodity imports have slowed down, (ii) decreased consumer demand due to public health measures (social distancing and quarantine) which led to the agriculture products getting stuck in the supply chain (and becoming surplus in the food system), (iii) lower household income and lack of liquidity especially for households with low savings or low income exacerbated by the decrease in market demand, (iv) problem of farmers and people to adapt to the new lifestyle given the situation characterized by cashless and “trust-based” transactions.

30. The government has the following measures to remedy the impacts of COVID-19 related to the agriculture sector: (i) extending remedy for people and farmers through the Social Security system and related welfare assistance which will enhance the liquidity of the households; (ii) support trade facilitation and distributions of agri-food products locally and internationally by creating new transport channels which can distribute products to the market; (iii) reducing the burden of expense and enhancing financial liquidity for farming households and entrepreneurs by suspending principal and interest payments to expand their original capital.

31. Concerning the economics and social rehabilitation project in the agriculture sector which has 29 projects (related to the impact of Covid-19), Thailand will follow the sufficiency economy principle focusing on creating jobs and generating income for the community. These initiatives have been approved by the Cabinet already.

32. The government is helping farmers enhance their productivity through (i) a focus on products that are demanded by the market given the new normal, creating online, offline market platforms and improving distribution centers in the market place; (ii) a one-stop service on soil and fertilizer for the community by analyzing the fertilizer and soil condition of their farms; (iii) through the One Tambon One

Farmer Group aim to support the sufficiency economy and the development of a new agriculture learning center in the subdistricts in Thailand; (iv) cooperatives'/farmers groups' potential development in every step from producing, processing, packaging, distribution and marketing along the food value chain.

33. The government has also created the provincial crop calendar which aids the balancing between the agri production and consumption side, which is key to ensure food security. This is an area-based food security management program. This facilitated the matching of food production with market demand, ensuring food security in both normal and crisis times. This was being done through cooperation between relevant departments under the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives (Central and Provincial). Final data from this initiative has been put together at the national agricultural big data center and agritech and innovation center. The crop calendar can help in production planning and adapting to the shrinking market given the market situation.

34. The Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives has been implementing climate change adaptation in agriculture to enhance the highland project that received TA assistance from the ADB in December 2020 for Bua Yai, Nanoi Nan province. The government received the 3 year-project with US\$2 million from the ADB to study the highlands. The project is concerned with climate change adaptation in agriculture for enhanced recovery and sustainability of highlands. The objective is to reduce vulnerability and enhance the adaptive capacity of highland communities and the ecosystem to cope with the current and protected climate change impacts. There are 4 outputs:

- I. Capacity to assess climate change vulnerabilities of highland agriculture improved;
- II. Gender-responsive, climate-smart agricultural practices prioritized and demonstrated;
- III. Agricultural product quality, value addition and market linkages are enhanced; and
- IV. Capacity of local governments and communities to address climate change strengthened.

35. For the priority project, Thailand will support the enhancement of food safety and quality of agricultural and food products as well as water and soil management for food security which are drivers of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Thailand has also been concerned about the management of disease outbreaks in plants and animals and the management of the movement of animals and plants across the border.

36. She closed her statement by thanking everyone for their attention.

37. Nguyen Do Anh Tuan, Director General, International Cooperation Department / WGA Coordinator, Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, Vietnam gave the last presentation for this section of the annual meeting. Mr. Nguyen Do Anh Tuan started by thanking the hosts and organizers of the annual meeting. He then reiterated the challenges and uncertainty that the Covid-19 pandemic has hurled towards the GMS economies. His presentation shared the following: (i) the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic imposed on Vietnam's agriculture; (ii) how Vietnam has responded to these challenges; (iii) what the GMS countries can do together in 5 to 10 years.

38. He acknowledged the long-term impacts of climate change and its negative impact on the agriculture sector's productivity and livelihood of farmers. He noted that Vietnam has been one of the five countries most affected by climate change (i.e., facing the risk of less water supply, less input) and recognized the need to diversify the crops in response. Climate change will affect the Mekong river delta and will threaten rice growing in the area due to increasing sea water levels, high salinity levels of irrigation water, drought, and disease.

39. Regarding Covid-19 impacts; last year, Vietnam was able to navigate through the Covid-19 pandemic. Recently, however, the Covid-19 pandemic has become a more serious problem with rising

cases and a need for very strict control measures like distancing and lockdowns in certain districts. The pandemic has disrupted the input supply, labor force, supply chain, transportation and distribution system.

40. Vietnam also faced the challenge of meeting new requirements and standards (in terms of food quality and Covid-19 related food safety requirements) imposed by importing countries.

41. With these challenges, he highlighted Vietnam's need to gather new market information, better logistics for agriculture value chains, and improve the food safety and quality control system. During the pandemic, he acknowledged the change in consumption patterns – people now use more processed food, consumers use online platforms to purchase food items, and consumers now require better food quality. To meet these changing demands, he recognized the need for Vietnam to improve agro-processing and upgrade distribution systems for agriculture products. He also raised the adverse migration of the urban population to rural areas during the pandemic as the workers moved back to their provinces.

42. He believed that it is possible to turn challenges into opportunities. For instance, he mentioned three interventions to address the adverse effects of climate change: (i) apply water supply techniques by changing crop selection, moving to crops that require less fresh water (i.e., move from rice to aquaculture); (ii) apply new technologies in the production of various crops to require less water; and (iii) assess green and low carbon agriculture value chain programs. For the Covid-19 concerns, Vietnam intends to (i) use digital platforms which can help farmers on arrangements like social distancing; (ii) digitalization of the agriculture value chain as this is important for traceability; and (iii) Vietnam has started a program on agro-processing and has a plan to develop an agro cluster that has higher value-addition on products to reduce loss and waste. To address the adverse migration of people from urban to rural areas, the government intends to promote non-farm production similar to that of Thailand. Vietnam has the One Village One Product program (OCOP program) to help utilize the growing labor in the countryside. Vietnam also intends to promote green recovery in agriculture.

43. For cooperation with the GMS and cooperation with ADB, he identified five interventions, namely, (i) create a mechanism for transparent water management; (ii) mobilize the private sector to promote responsible investment in supplying high-quality food with a transparent supply chain that is inclusive and sustainable (he mentioned Vietnam is serious in its commitments to the UN System Summit to become a transparent, responsible, and sustainable global food supplier)¹; (iii) support agriculture digitization, innovation and start-ups; (iv) rural employment – OCOP program can be an interesting model where the GMS countries can work together; and (v) cooperative development and capacity development in the GMS countries to help the farmers adapt to the situation post-Covid-19.

44. The annual meeting's master of ceremonies, Ms. Kristina Reyes, encouraged the annual participants to answer this quick poll question:

Quick Poll: Following the Covid-19 pandemic, more and more consumers have shifted to healthier and safer food such as certified GAP and organic products?

- Yes
- No

45. To this, 77% of those who answered the poll agreed that consumers have shifted to healthier food options such as certified GAP and organic products following the Covid-19 pandemic, 23% disagreed.

¹ For this, he encouraged the creation of mechanisms for investment packages to individual countries for their respective farmers/private sectors can access ADB's assistance.

2. Session 1: Agri-Food Safety and Quality Harmonization

46. Session 1 opened with a quick poll question as follows:

Quick Poll: Are you familiar with ASEAN MAMRASCA?

- No. I am hearing it for the first time.
- I know a little about it.
- Yes, I know a lot about it.

47. Of the total participants who responded to the poll, 43% said “No. I am hearing it for the first time” and 45% indicated that they know a little about it while 13% know very well the ASEAN MAMRASCA.

2.1. Keynote: Multilateral Arrangement for the Mutual Recognition of Agri-food Standards and Conformity Assessment

48. Dr. Pham Quang Minh Assistant Director, Sectoral Development Directorate, Head of Food, Agriculture and Forestry Division, ASEAN Economic Community Department, the ASEAN Secretariat gave the keynote presentation (please see Annex 3 for the copy of the presentation). He expounded on 5 issues as follows:

- I. Introduction to MAMRASCA
- II. Expectations for MAMRASCA towards regional trade.
- III. What have the ASEAN Member states done to prepare for MAMRASCA?
- IV. What needs to be done at the GMS level to support the early adoption of MAMRASCA?
- V. Covid-19 responses/initiatives in supporting ASEAN food safety mutual recognition initiatives.

49. In 2015, ASEAN moved towards the full realization of the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC). It also moved to develop its AEC Footprint 2025 where they are thinking of improving the trade safety of food products by 2025. ASEAN has seen the need to promote intraregional trade of their products by improving food safety and competitiveness. The AEC Footprint 2025 has a wide spread of food products and the economies need to focus on how to promote intraregional trade in every food product by 2025. The barriers encountered in pursuing the Footprint 2025 include: (i) the existence 10 different standards and 10 different conformity assessment systems across the 10 member states and 46 working groups in ASEAN Secretariat. This caused challenges for the exporters to comply with many different standards, a barrier to implementation. This has been discussed in the ASEAN working groups and a focus on various subsectors like livestock, fishery and forestry has been set. To assist in addressing the complexity and varying standards and conformity assessment systems, there was a proposal from one of the working groups to develop the MAMRASCA.

50. The MAMRASCA aims to establish a mechanism of recognition. MAMRACA was established to facilitate an effective mechanism for operationalization and setting of national standards for agriculture at both national and regional level to facilitate trade. It was endorsed by Senior Officials Meeting - ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Agriculture and Forestry (SOM-AMAF) in August 2017.

51. MAMRASCA can meet the following expectations:

- I. The introduction of the MAMRASCA will be an important step towards greater regional integration in the agri-food sector. It will help facilitate trade for agri-food products amongst member states.
- II. MAMRASCA is expected to be a regional mechanism that covers regional standards, certification and accreditation bodies to ensure food safety in ASEAN in the value chains.
- III. MAMRASCA is expected to remove non-tariff barriers (NTBs), and facilitate increased flows of goods bi-laterally and regionally.

52. MAMRASCA covers 3 sub-sectors, namely, agriculture, livestock and aquaculture. Expert working groups for good agricultural practice (GAP), good animal husbandry practice (GAHP), good aquaculture practice (GAqP) are established.

53. For GAP, the most progress has been achieved towards aligning ASEAN member states' (AMS) national standards with the GAP for fruits and vegetables.

54. ASEAN has discussed the different food standards and safety like the GAP, GAHP and GAqP. The member countries agreed to focus on agriculture, livestock and aquaculture. They have developed good practices for fruits and vegetables.

55. On GAHP, the member states have discussed the alignment of national GAHP through a working group established around three to four years ago. Most of the national GAqP has been aligned with the regional GAqP. They have also agreed in establishing a working group for GAqP.

56. On the conformity assessment body (CAB), so far the ASEAN Secretariat has yet to receive a report on the compliance from the national conformity assessment bodies and how they are in alignment with international standards like the ISO. The CAB recognition encompasses the certification and accreditation bodies as well as the laboratories.

57. The ASEAN also discussed horticulture produce. Sixty ASEAN standards have been established for horticulture produce (i.e., mango, potato, pineapple, banana, melon, dragon fruit, etc.).

58. Currently the member states are in discussion to align the national standards with the ASEAN standards. MAMRASCA has three important aspects: (i) standards, (ii) alignment of standards, and (iii) the certification and accreditation bodies.

59. Dr. Minh discussed the obstacles with MAMRASCA:

- I. The application of standards (GAP, GAHP, GAqP) are mostly voluntary; no mechanism to enforce the implementation in member states; no standards for certification and accreditation vary in each member country; different levels of capacity, laboratory and infrastructure; private sector's recognition and adoption on the MAMRASCA is also a concern in the AMS.
- II. In 2018, ASEAN Secretariat conducted a survey on awareness and results indicate that only 50% of the buy-side market actors surveyed were aware of the ASEAN Standards. However, one common standard for 10 member states will facilitate the business activities, so the vast majority of respondents see the implementation of regional standards across AMS as a positive development for their business interests.
- III. There is also concern that national standards are viewed as a technical barrier to protect the local market.

60. There will be many involved agencies or ministries, mostly agriculture ministry, trade ministry, health ministry for this issue in each member country.

61. In developing MAMRASCA, many discussions were held. Development was based on ASEAN agreements on mutual recognition, ASEAN guidelines, and in considering also other sectors and recognition mechanism in ASEAN like tourism and accounting, architecture, etc.

62. Task Force was established in 2018 with the participation of experts, focal points from AMS, members of working groups on ASEAN GAP, GAHP, GAqP. The private sector is also invited to participate to contribute and share views.

63. The key provision of the MRA establishes the principle of mutual recognition upon meeting specified commitments. The provisions in this section will establish Milestone 1 (Standards alignment) and Milestone 2 (CAB recognition) as objectives for AMS to meet at their own pace. The MAMRASCA text has articles, amendments and definitions but no final document of MAMRASCA has been agreed up to now.

64. For early adoption of MAMRASCA, it is proposed by the speaker that the SAFSP TA and GMS ASEAN members to consider and implement the activities focusing on the following priorities:

- i. Continue to focus on the common understanding of food safety, and quality issues among the countries to come up with better multi-sector coordination and cooperation.
- ii. Continue to focus on the improvement of the control of food safety risks in agri-food trade.
- iii. Continue to align the national standards (GAP, GAHP and GAqP, and product standards) with the ASEAN Standards.
- iv. Continue to improve capacity of certification and lab bodies to meet international standards (ISO).

65. With regard to the Covid-19 pandemic response and recovery actions, a statement of the AMAF on ensuring food security, food safety and nutrition drafted in 2020 is seen to be signed before 2021 ends. Under its statement, ASEAN will have all efforts in protecting the health of ASEAN consumers, ensuring fair practices in food trade and facilitating the free movement of safe food products in ASEAN.

2.2. Panel discussion: Perspectives on ASEAN Harmonized Standards and GMS Countries as Early Adopters of MAMRASCA – What Needs to be Done?

66. **Mr. Suriyan Vichitlekarn, Executive Director of the Mekong Institute, Thailand** facilitated the panel discussion. Mr. Vichitlekarn defined the scope of the discussion. He said that GMS is guided by the vision of strategic framework 2030 in developing a more integrated, prosperous, sustainable and inclusive subregion which is built on the region's strength of community, connectivity and competitiveness. The region is looking into ways to improve productivity and facilitate the harmonization of food safety and quality standards. He acknowledged the presentation of Dr. Minh and the possibility of using MAMRASCA as a basis where the GMS national can explore harmonization of food safety and quality standards and conformity assessment. He invited the members of the panel to share their views on the appropriateness of using MAMRASCA to facilitate the work of GMS in the harmonization of food safety and quality standard and suggest steps to advance such implementation.

67. **Ms. Lin Jing, Chinese Academy of Customs Administration, Vice-President, PRC** gave an overview of China's import of agriculture products. She said that China's expanding economy, rising disposable income and rising urbanization are driving robust demand for imported agri-food products including fruits, vegetables, etc. In recent years, China has been actively expanding its trade with ASEAN: In addition to China-ASEAN Expo, China International Import Expo has played an important role in developing world consumer agri products in 2020. China's trade import value has reached 170.08 bn USD with a year-on-year increase of 14%. China has strict regulations for the majority of imported agri products regarding quality, quantity, origin and import control. Products also need to meet other criteria

such as packaging requirements, pre-clearance if applicable and also treatment options. Ms. Lin Jing was of the view that the GMS ASEAN countries should play an active role when it comes to MAMRASCA.

68. The ASEAN agri-food MRA will be focused on addressing national mandatory production standards (GAP). Adoption of GAP, GAHP and GAqP will follow agreed upon adjustments conducted through a 3-part process (self-evaluation, peer review by specific technical committees, and resolution). One of the most beneficial developments from this model is encouraging the least-developed ASEAN countries to upgrade their standards including the adoption of important food safety measures at the farm level. Every food MRAs also focus on a complementary adjustment system where guaranteeing appropriate levels of protection for humans, plants, or animals is a concern. It is thus important to recognize the interdependent roles of standards and the conformity adjustment system. She noted that the written laws on their own are unimportant if market actors have no assurance that suppliers comply with the rules. This is where the role of conformity assessment bodies becomes important (i.e., certification bodies, accreditation bodies, laboratories, i.e.,). Moreover, mutual recognition of conformity adjustment also accelerates trade facilitation between countries.

69. MAMRASCA may focus on one or several points in the value chain (i.e., primary level, processing, packing, transportation, storage, etc.). MRAs often focus on a single stage of the value chain but may also be designed to focus on mutual points along the value chain. MAMRASCA focuses exclusively on the production level and can incentivize small and medium-scale producers to adopt improved GAPs to enter regional markets. A single focus on MRAs may not be inclusive of all food safety concerns. While additional MRAs are being put in place, Ms. Lin Jing suggested the following: (i) Build a platform to facilitate information exchange - food safety big data can include agri-food safety information discovered during the inspection guaranteeing of during and after importation (with the help of this platform stakeholders can timely and effectively prevent and control agri-food products agri-food safely risks); (ii) provide support joint financial management and provide means for the settlement of trade disputes; and (iii) involve the private sector often as the private sector understands what can be done for trade and trust across boundaries (the region needs to know what the private sector wants and what they do not want from their suppliers).

70. Finally, Ms. Lin Jing noted that MAMRASCA is not a panacea, it does not cover every aspect of trade. It is valuable to think of it as a free trade agreement that provides the basis for accepting specific differences in the regulatory framework of a trading partner.

71. Dr. Thavisith Bounyasouk, Director of Clen Agriculture Standard center, Department of Agriculture, Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry, Lao PDR said a legal framework for the implementation of GAP, GAHP, and GAqP which consists of the elements of standards for food safety and crops in animal husbandry and agriculture is needed. He took note that MAMRASCA consists of three core requirements: (i) standard equivalency – ASEAN has a GAP experts working group which has done some assessment of national standards (Lao PDR, Cambodia, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam already participated in this process) against ASEAN standards; (ii) conformity assessment in accordance with ISO1765 and ISO17011 – the ASEAN working group has developed some tools and guidelines for alignment, for example, ASEAN GAP Certification Manual and ASEAN GAP Official Control, which the countries can follow; and (iii) laboratory based on ISO17025 – not many activities were conducted for this area.

72. He said that countries with low capacity to join MAMRASCA face three challenges in adopting MAMRASCA: (i) technical expertise and capacity of the human resource in the country; (ii) national legal framework to adopt MAMRASCA; and (iii) infrastructure (e.g., laboratory equipment, tools and facilities). Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar - these countries need technical and financial assistance that will support the following: (i) human resource capacity building activities on standard certification and other requirements for implementation of MAMRASCA; (ii) review of the national framework vis-à-vis the requirements for the implementation of MAMRASCA; and (iii) enhancement of the capacity and facilities of the laboratories.

73. Dr. Bounyasouk called for PRC's support to build the platform for information exchange and share how PRC can recognize the smaller GMS economies' agri-food trade. He explained that the GMS countries need more information on the standards being imposed in practice for trade within the subregion.

74. **Dr. Nguyen Anh Phong, Director, Institute for Policy and Strategy for Agriculture and Rural Development (IPSARD), Vietnam** expressed that his views are broadly aligned with the comments and suggestions of the panel members and agreed to the suggested measures.

75. Dr. Nguyen acknowledged that Covid-19 has brought seemingly unsurmountable challenges for the region though it presented opportunities for the GMS countries to accelerate efforts on regional cooperation in controlling food safety and quality.

76. He noted that Dr. Minh's presentation was very informative with promising solutions. Nevertheless, Dr. Nguyen suggested digitalization both in private and public services which can help in controlling the quality of agri-food products and value chains. He said IPSARD is pushing for the development of a big data center, seen as a good starting point for digitization activities. Data that will be collected include (i) inputs for agriculture production – to tracing of the quality of production inputs and monitoring of chemicals used in production; and (ii) logistics data. Data will help identify the gaps and differences among the countries in terms of regulation in particular.

77. Dr. Nguyen also suggested the digitization of all the public services which will help make information more transparent for the agriculture products. He also said the countries can pilot a risk (market risk, environment risk, epidemic-related risk) warning system.

78. **Dr. Ker Monthivuth, Director, Plant Protection, Sanitary and Phytosanitary Department (PPSPD), MAFF (CAMBODIA)** started his statement by suggesting that food standards and food quality are crucial for uplifting welfare and competitiveness at both national and regional levels and it has given birth to outstanding regional cooperation activities - ensuring safe trading of agri-food products within the context of increasing transboundary movement and trading of food across borders. There has been intensifying intent for technical cooperation around the themes of transparency.

79. He said food quality and safety standards are crucial for uplifting welfare and competitiveness at both national and regional levels. It has given birth to many outstanding regional and international cooperation initiatives as part of an effort to ensure safe trade in agri-food products within the context of increasing transboundary movement and trade of food across borders. Along this line, there has been an intensifying attempt to promote technical cooperation around the themes of "equivalence & transparency" with the aim of having trading partners accept or recognize each others' measures and standards applied in food agri-food production and processing, to facilitate trade.

80. He noted the following bottlenecks to MRA: (1) MRA is self-explanatory suggesting the existence of different regulations, standards and conformity assessment systems; otherwise, the concept of MRA would not have emerged as an important theme for regional cooperation. Such differences have led to inconsistencies in safety and quality standards across borders that create many uncertainties for buyers, effectively limiting their demand for agri-food products from within the region; and (2) varying economic development status among countries should be regarded as one of the fundamental structural challenges and constraints, limiting investment in FQS control systems, both from regulatory and technical standpoints, and as a consequence limiting capacity to comply with regional and international standards.

81. He suggested the countries conduct pilot activities focusing on a few agri-food products and recognizing that MAMRASCA is a long way to go in terms of countries being able to meet its guidelines (it is also complicated). He said the shared vision of the ASEAN GMS countries to discuss the recognition arrangement between countries and the member countries can begin with small steps, first by stocktaking

the lessons learned towards developing a model in developing MRA for intra-GMS trade and beyond its borders. He suggested piloting a few value chains for specific agri-food products, and conducting scoping studies at the national level to identify gaps in regulations and relevant testing facilities, and related capacity-building programs among the GMS. Results and recommendations of the studies will be instrumental in directing investments to help GMS countries bridge the gaps both in the regulation and safety assurance systems. The studies can also look into the different angles of the food control systems. Moreover, well-targeted capacity-building programs should also be pursued. Information sharing at all levels, involving a wide range of stakeholders including academics, institutions, etc is essential. He opined that it is important to level the playing field for the economies of the region. Further efforts and investment must be geared up toward addressing these fundamental bottlenecks to enhance regulatory and technical aspects of respective FQS control systems. There is a need to create a relatively equal or the same playing field in this area so as to promote the realization of MRA among GMS.

82. He noted that the AMS have made significant headway in terms of putting in place agricultural best practices known as “GAP, GAqP, & GAHP” and Organic Agriculture to be used as a reference point for harmonization in establishing respective national standards;

83. Further efforts and investment must be geared up toward addressing these fundamental bottlenecks to enhance regulatory and technical aspects of respective FQS control systems. There is a need to create a relatively equal or the same playing field in this area so as to promote the realization of MRA among GMS.

84. With regard to the support that Thailand can provide to narrow the capacity gap for the region, Dr. Monthivuth recognized the diligence of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives Thailand to provide support for the rest of the ASEAN GMS countries when it comes to technical knowledge. Thailand has supported capacity building through testing and calibration of laboratories, giving seminars on food hygiene, traceability and food safety risk assessments in various fields like pesticide residue or microbiological risk assessment. He then emphasized that in MAMRASCA, capacity building is important for implementation. The implementation of GAP, GAHP, and GAqP need multi-agency cooperation which can be challenging to coordinate.

85. **Mr. Suriyan Vichitlekarn** closed the panel discussion by providing a summary of the perspectives of the panel members. Harmonization of standard and conformity assessment will provide a very strong foundation for GMS agriculture to prosper in the future. Despite the challenges that were shared by the panel members there is a possibility among the ASEAN GMS countries and PRC to progress in the MAMRASCA initiative. We have heard about practical suggestions that can be done in the GMS region which can be used as bases for the activities that the GMS will conduct in the coming months. Some of the discussion touched upon policy and regulatory framework, working with private sector, and looking into a platform for engaging various agencies from different sectors. He then thanked all the panel members for sharing their insights and suggestions.

3. Session 2: Role of the Private Sector in the Harmonization of Agri-food Standards on Safety and Quality

3.1. Keynote: Harmonization of FSQ Standards in the GMS – Private Sector Perspectives

86. **Mr. Chusak Chuenprayuth, Chairman KCFresh, (Thailand Vegetable Exporter to Europe)** gave the first presentation for Session 2 (please see Annex 4 for the copy of his presentation). He first thanked the meeting hosts for the invitation he received to share the experiences of his company.

87. Mr. Chuenprayuth shared that KCFresh exports to many countries in Europe and complies with the standards according to the demands of the clients. He mentioned most exporters understand food safety law and requirements which can be quite steep. He noted the Thailand level market standard required FSQ. Those who want to export have to learn how to comply with the standard processes which start at the farms (i.e., compliance to GAP certification requirements, private standards and government organic standards). Any farm that would like to sell products overseas would have to apply the GAP certification requirements, chain management, packing houses according to the FSQ standards in the country of destination, i.e., UK and Europe). If the farm complies with the FSQ standards, the farm can access these markets for trading. The whole value chain can be checked for compliance, from the supply of raw materials to the distribution via a cold value chain if required and traceability systems can apply throughout.

88. KCFresh complies with the ThaiGAP, QGAP, Organic Thailand, which are certified with British Retail Consortium (BRC) global standard for food safety, GMP and HACCP, Organic Thailand. Operations-wise, the company educates smallholder farmers to understand what GAP is and remarked that the private sector works very hard to comply with those standard requirements. For fresh vegetables –labels follow requirements for retail packing (with packing in polystyrene box with jell ice packs or cardboard boxes). For wholesale, packing with cardboard with a compliant label is adopted.

89. In order to help restrain the spread of COVID-19, KC Fresh has built up a team to deliver fresh products directly to the customers in Bangkok and other provinces. The customers can get various products any day at their doorsteps. The products are delivered by experienced drivers (via logistics in cold trucks) who are trained with the procedures to avoid the virus while ensuring the customers receive their orders safe and fresh. KC Fresh has kick-started new innovations collaborating with new investors to expand plant factory indoor vertical farming system for efficient quality food production.

90. **Dr. Phuwakji Rungtiwakornkij, Managing Director, the Big P Trading Co., Ltd., Thailand fruit exporter to PRC** gave the second presentation for Session 2 (see Annex 5 for the copy of the presentation). Dr. Rungtiwakornkij talked about the import promotion of frozen and fresh-fruit products.

91. Dr. Rungtiwakornkij gave a brief on Big P Trading company's current business in (i) frozen and fresh-fruit products and (ii) the import promotion of frozen and fresh-fruit products. He highlighted that at present, because of the increasing demand for frozen and fresh-fruit products, more and more entrepreneurs are importing such products to satisfy consumers' needs.

92. Dr. Rungtiwakornkij pointed out there are some restrictions on legal guidelines and measures related to frozen and fresh-fruit product importation in practice, given Thai government's official

permission on import of such products. These have caused problems and obstacles for such importation and conflicted with the government's relevant supporting and promoting policies.

93. He expressed that related legal guidelines and measures need to be amended to promote importation and to benefit relevant consumers. Cases of exporting Thai products to PRC and importing PRC products to Thailand are introduced and quality standards are stressed as the key to promoting market access to PRC.

94. To facilitate the above-discussed cross-border trade, Dr. Rungtiwakornkij recommended the improvement of: (i) human development; (ii) level of education; (iii) plant and crops identification from the officers; and (iv) conduct of authority process including monitoring, sampling, inspection and investigation. From the PRC side, he suggested improving work on (i) standard level of safety for chemical residue; (ii) artificial and "fake" food; and (iii) products description and labelling.

3.2. Panel discussion: Feedback and Reflections from Private Sector and Organizations

95. The panel discussion opened with a quick poll survey on the following statement:

Quick Poll: The private sector plays an important role in the harmonization of agri-food standards on safety and quality

- Yes, private sector plays an important role
- No, it's mostly the government's job

96. Of the total participants who responded to the poll, 79% hold the view that the private sector plays an important role in the harmonization of the agri-food standards on safety and quality and 21% think otherwise.

97. **Mr. Suriyan Vichitlekarn, Executive Director of the Mekong Institute, Thailand** moderated the panel discussion. He first summarized the key points that were raised in the earlier discussions. He noted that there was a consensus among the representatives of the GMS countries that GMS cooperation in agriculture will need to rely on a very strong foundation of harmonization of agri-food safety and quality standard. With MAMRASCA (some experiences were shared by Dr. Minh) there is a clear possibility that the GMS countries can expand harmonization of trade. There are challenges and recommendations on how to use MAMRASCA to expand harmonization which includes the development of pilots, supporting capacity development recognizing the role of the private sector and the use of digitization. The overarching message in the previously completed presentations by Mr. Chuenprayoth and Mr. Rungtiwakornkij was that the private sector has a role to play in the harmonization of the agri-food standards and at the same time, the government also plays a role, albeit different, in this area. The government plays a key role in broadening the general understanding of good agricultural practices, policy regulatory framework, compliance, clear procedures, and cross-border processes. This will give the private sector a common ground in conducting business transactions. Mr. Vichitlekarn then introduced the panel members.

98. Dr. William Chen, *Director, Nanyang Technology University Food Science & Technology, Programme, Nanyang Technological University in Singapore* gave the first panelist reaction. He said the workshop is a great opportunity for Singapore to share and learn about the landscape of agriculture and food products. He agreed with all other panelists about the importance of food safety. He shared the experience of Singapore, an island country spanning 700 km², of which less than 1% of the land is devoted to agricultural farming. More than 90% of agriculture products and food are imported.

99. He encouraged everyone to look at food from a systems point of view which means the following must be simultaneously considered along with food: processing efficiency, transportation efficiency, and reviewing the nutrition requirement that may be unique for the population. A food system can be established if all these are put into consideration. The area for improvement in food system efficiency should also be reviewed in the efforts of producing according to the nutritional needs of the population and to avert food wastage.

100. He said tightening up the food system is essential: if the available food is not maximized, food production will never be enough. Therefore, good processing and transportation efficiency will lower the pressure of primary production. Agricultural production should also consider the nutritional demand required by a population - this way food wastage can be avoided.

101. Dr. Chen noted that urban farming may likely grow at a steep rate. By 2050, more than 70% of people will work in urban areas where demand will increase in terms of freshness and taste, etc in food. This will provide opportunities for urban farming to grow the consumer's demand and to mitigate the impact of climate change and food supply chain disruption e.g. by similar shocks to COVID-19.

102. Urban farming is tech-driven driven so its cost of production will be high but because demand will drive supply, hence with growing consumer buy-in, the demand will drive down production costs.

103. On a public-private partnership, Singapore has pushed up two new initiatives in the food space: one is called Singapore Food Story program aiming to achieve 30% of nutrition requirement produced from local production by 2030 (less than 10% currently). Another pillar of the program is alternative protein sources and the third pillar is a food safety assessment.

104. Government support needs to bring in private partnerships as a lot of investment in infrastructure is needed and private companies could come in. The private sector could play a more neutral role as they adopt technology and even become the solutions provider to enhance the food system. Also, in the agriculture sector, technology can be adopted through the supply chain: sensors to monitor the climate and farming efficiency, climate change monitoring and supply chain monitoring to trace the food supply chain and to prevent food fraud. Production of alternative protein can also be explored.

105. On alternative protein, as normal food is produced in urban farming, although increasing demand from urban consumers, proper risk assessments for these sources of food supply are critical to ensure a sustainable food security path as a lot of food comes from different species. Meanwhile, allergy and toxicity levels could be explored and reviewed.

106. Dr. Chen also shared some details on the Singapore government's new program, the Singapore Agri-Food Innovation Lab which would help the food industry to move to commercialization (here private sector will have to participate because they know the market and they have the network). In this initiative, government and private sector will work together and develop technologies.

107. **Mr. Chen Qisheng, General Manager, China Certification and Inspection Group (CCIC) Cambodia Inc.** was the second panelist to share his perspectives (see Annex 6 for the copy of his discussion).

108. Mr. Chen Qisheng said China's safety and quality requirement for importing agricultural products has three parts: plant quarantine; limit requirement of pesticide residue and contaminants; and commodity quality requirement. The imported agricultural products should not contain harmful organisms such as plant disease, pests and disease which are dangerous to the plant soil. All products imported must be investigated after shipment. Sanitary and phytosanitary certification must be issued by relevant departments in the country of origin. He also mentioned the requirement on pesticide residue and

contaminants (heavy metals and toxin). Agriculture products must meet China's national food safety standards "maximum residue limits of pesticides in food (GB 2763-2019).

109. He said CCIC applies GAP, implements food safety standards and provides product certification and traceability. He added that in recent years, both Cambodia and Laos have received the rice certification to export to China with good quality rice imports increasing to China from 50,000 tons in 2010 to 265,000 in 2020 and 50,000 tons of glutinous rice per year from Laos, showcasing a strong trade relationship between China-Cambodia and China-Laos. CCIC also provides the food process quality supervision and traceability service for agriculture products exported to China. Fresh banana and mango to China were also monitored.

110. Mrs. Sharmeen Khan, *Chief Marketing Officer, OpsSmart, USA* was the third panel member.

111. Ms. Khan introduced her company, OpsSmart Technologies Inc., which has worked on traceability systems in the last 15 years to ensure food safety and quality are proved. Their software includes entire supply chains with climate from smallholders to large companies and public entities. As a software developing company, OpsSmart works closely with government and private and public-sector traceability from start to finish.

112. OpsSmart believes that data sharing is the number one hurdle that governments and the private sector face. All stakeholders have their data – whether on paper, on a document, on a platform developed in their own company. The farmer has data and the grocery store has data and if food safety is what is needed, we need to trace it from the beginning of production all the way to the last mile. The ability to share digitized data is at the heart of creating a global supply chain. Paperwork is time-consuming; digital data with a barcode could help with checking and data traceability. Agencies working together through sharing digital data benefit from reliable and readily accessible secure data with the aid of a barcode and a smartphone. This supports private and public-sector partnerships by using digital information in establishing trust.

113. For small farmers, the biggest barrier is the lack of access to technologies and understanding of how to use them. The level of education and lack of human development must be addressed, thus it is important to be inclusive and collaborate with all stakeholders: government agencies, non-profit agencies such as ADB and technology companies.

114. A program can be created for the traceability of goods with data that can be accessed by producers, custom officers, retailers and consumers. It needs to have harmonized data following industry and country standards. With the increasing alignment of global supply chains, digital data exchange-enabled traceability systems using technologies are cost-effective, benefiting consumers in making informed consumption choices. With data collected throughout the value chain for both the use of smallholder producers and big companies, the same system grows with more data and more users in the system. Having a collective knowledge on what data to look for across the stakeholders of the value chain becomes natural and promotes the development of industry standards.

115. OpsSmart sees the system could be used for ecosystems with large geographical area by partnering with local technology companies in Vietnam, Laos, China Thailand, Cambodia, sharing knowledge, increasing the outreach to not just the agricultural economy but also the technological economy.

116. Ms. Khan closed her statements by suggesting that access to global markets can only be achieved by synchronizing and harmonizing the data and creating a traceable food system.

3.3. Open discussion

117. Mr. Suriyan Vichitlekarn posed two broad questions for further discussion: (i) what else can be the role of the private sector in the harmonization of agri-food standards? (ii) the work on harmonization of standards is huge and cannot be done solo by the private sector nor public sector; what might be ways that we can use to foster more public-private partnership and create a scale of implementation?

118. Mr. Chusak Chuenprayoth, said PCIC in Thailand has been in discussion with the Thai Chamber of Commerce on how to recognize the private standard of China and Thailand. The GMS countries could learn from this and trade among the GMS countries could be more active.

119. Dr. William Chen, regarding the public-private partnership, suggested that non-government organizations (NGOs) have a role to play in this space. In his experience working in partnership on both academic and technology development, NGOs have been active especially in capacity building initiatives. The GUFU institute based in the US has launched the first undergraduate course in alternative meat. Future Food has organized several workshops/seminars and is becoming a neutral base for public agencies and industries to come together. It is a critical area to mention the smallholder farmers, especially in Asia as it is a region that is facing several challenges: climate change, COVID pandemic, etc. (that disrupted the supply chain and production). How to move away from the traditional farming system through looking for alternative practices; the private sector could direct smallholder farmers in the right direction for future farming (e.g., seed companies know what is needed in the future).

120. Ms. Khan said the use and promotion of blockchain technology would be valuable as government grows and tries to promote the global supply chain. It is important to promote or adapt the available one or use the local technology company to develop their own blockchain as it is intrinsic to the global supply chain and having quality data to share with verified and safe and secure data. The countries need to invest in technology and infrastructure including access to internet and wifi. Many smallholder farmers lack the technological background or infrastructure to disseminate the information, which can be addressed by the government if they want to expand the economy and business.

121. Mr. Qi Sheng Chen said the agriculture department of the host countries shall require and strengthen the cooperation with agricultural producers and private sector applying GAP and achieving the scientific use of pesticide and fertilizer. He added that agri-products must have pesticide residue basic reports issued by the concerned agencies.

122. When we talk about PPP we mention the role of smallholder farmers. Now we are facing issues such as climate change, Covid-19 pandemic that has disrupted the supply chain and production. Moving forward, there has been discussion to move away from certain farming practices and develop alternative produce. The private sector can step in to help the smallholder farmers to have a reselection on what to grow for the future farming (some of these private companies have their own seed farming so they know what is coming in the future). Here is one area where the private sector can fill the gap. Government can certainly come in for infrastructure support so that smallholder farmers, when they change their farming practice, will not be on the losing end.

123. Mr. Monthivuth Ker, said food safety is a cross-cutting and multi-disciplinary aspect involving a lot of actors along the value chain. Governments must adopt a value chain approach bringing all relevant stakeholders, including smallholder farmers, as food safety starts with the farms. All actors must be identified and engaged.

4. Session 3: Implementing Food Safety Harmonization and Traceability Initiatives in the GMS

124. The presentation opened with a quick poll which solicited the views of the annual meeting participants on the following statement:

Quick Poll: Food safety threats go beyond national borders

- Yes, food safety threats cut across national borders.
- No.

125. The results show that 94% of those who responded to the poll believed that food safety threats go beyond national borders and only 6% thought otherwise.

4.1. Presentation: ADB TA-9916 GMS Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security Program – Plan and Actions to support GMS Food Safety and Quality Harmonization, Traceability and Digital Solutions for Harmonization and Trade

126. Ms. Vichelle Roaring-Arunsuwannakorn, *TA 9916 Food Safety and Quality Specialist* and Pier Paolo Ficarelli, *TA 9916 Digital Agriculture and Innovation Specialist* gave the joint presentation (see Annex 7 for copy of the presentation).

127. Ms. Roaring-Arunsuwannakorn presented first where she highlighted the vision of the GMS countries which is becoming the leading supplier of safe and climate-friendly agri-food products. ADB TA 9916, with the support of the GMS Working Group on Agriculture, backs this vision through its various outputs including the provision of capacity building activities on adopting safe, climate-friendly agricultural practices to at least 60 agribusiness and 500 farmers (30% of which are women). Through the TA, ADB and the private sector can rally a pipeline of climate-friendly, agri-food value chains investment projects worth USD600 million.

128. The five key priorities of TA 9916 were presented. Ms. Roaring-Arunsuwannakorn discussed priorities (i) to (ii) and Mr. Ficarelli discussed priorities (iii) to (iv), as follows:

- I. Policy coherence on food safety and quality through the mutual recognition of ASEAN standards, and equivalence recognition by the PRC - capacity building initiatives will be helpful and there is an openness and readiness from PRC to support the ASEAN neighbors. The MAMRASCA would be strategic for GMS in the development of harmonized agri-food FSQ standards. It would also be strategic for the PRC to recognize the equivalence of ASEAN standards to promote market access to PRC and vice versa. Therefore, it is necessary to elevate the coordination and discourse at the GMS level. A technical Task Force would be useful to provide a mechanism for information and experience exchange as a basis for strengthening policy coherence and coordination of activities among national authorities working on FSQ across GMS countries. It is hoped that the ministerial level endorsement or joint undertaking on food safety and quality can be secured by 2022 to 2023 during the 3rd Agriculture Minister's Meeting.

- II. **Build capacity for mutual recognition/verification for safe and climate-friendly agri-food products** – this will be aided by training government representatives, support programs for agribusinesses who intend to transition to ASEAN/international standards, upgrading of laboratories, and recognition/accreditation of testing facilities for SPS/MRLs to eliminate multiple testing to meet various standards. Pilots will be conducted as proof of concept of mutual recognition standards (mutual recognition agreements for GAP and traceability) for the export of fruits and vegetables². There is also potential for having fast-track green lanes in border crossing points through the GMS cross-border transport agreement.
- III. **Deployment of digital technologies for traceability of safe and climate-friendly agri-foods** - In line with the digital transformation strategy described in the inception report, the focus in action point 3 is on e-traceability in support of the effective management of FSQ standards that should provide also smallholder benefits. E-traceability is a technical area with different levels of complexities. It goes from simple digitization of farmer suppliers to digitalization across applications of VC actors combining batch traceability barcoding, transport and cold chain records, with agribusiness management applications, so-called ERP. Large food enterprises trading internationally have developed personalized and highly digitalized e-traceability applications to serve their business case & clients concentrating lots of data not easily accessible by third parties. For introducing e-traceability in small and medium agribusinesses, trading in the sub-region, the project would like to play a catalytic role to ensure, the adoption of applications making use of GS1 barcoding standards, open application programming interface (APIs) for interoperability and data sharing application such as electronic product code information services (EPCIS). On the other hand, the project will create opportunities for capacity building to agribusinesses and for maximizing farmer benefits as a way of doing the right things to foster e-traceability adoption. In order to fast-track e-traceability technology adoption, only country assessments will start determining what is going to be possible in the next project phase. Nevertheless, a first assessment lead could be the analysis of the existing National traceability initiatives and their potential for maximizing farmer benefits³. A second lead to reinforcing stakeholder learning and agribusinesses adoption is to explore partnerships with an experienced e-traceability service provider already operating in the region, such as OpsSmart, under the countries' umbrellas of existing programs, such as the Cambodia National QR initiative to ensure alignment and/or data sharing.
- IV. **Contribute to Covid-19 recovery efforts by enabling smallholder farmers direct access to higher-value markets** - The focus is on linking directly farmers to consumers or higher value export markets to overcome the market access gap faced by small-scale producers, an ongoing challenge in agriculture development. This link also has to be seen as an effective recovery strategy from the COVID-19 pandemic proven by numerous initiatives by the public sector supporting the engagement of smallholders in linking directly with online markets. Direct market links increase farmer income by shortening the supply chain and eliminating middlemen, hence determining lower farm gate prices. Platforms work by making use of algorithms to match farmers to appropriate buyers, optimizing local

² Examples cited include exporting of fruits by CLMVT countries to PRC, Lao PDR's interest to export off-season vegetables to Thailand through Tesco

³ Examples include: Vietnam National Traceability Portal (where Mr. Bui Ba Chinh can share the progress on the 100 Traceability Scheme led by DOST during the panel discussion); Thailand National Platforms for QR Trace and BCT Trace-Thai.com under the new lead of the National Science Technology Development Agency (Dr. Suporn Pongnumkul can expound on this during the panel discussion); PRC Yunnan province's launch of the blockchain technology (BCT) in agri-food value chain for e-traceability which was aimed to build an internet of public decentralized BCT applications in PRC.

transport for produce aggregation and providing immediate payment to farmers. For action 4, a first lead could be to assess (a) existing national initiatives linking farmers to e-commerce businesses, and (b) digital technologies to broaden farmer access to online markets and producers' GAP training⁴. Another thread is to explore opportunities for supporting smallholders to link with fresh produce buyers/exporters by engaging a digital platform service provider. Digital platforms are still nascent, but already showing great potential for broadening small-scale producer market access in a cost-effective and scalable way⁵.

- V. Engage with development partners and the private sector on harmonized food safety and quality management systems and digital transformation. This priority (Action 5) has to be seen as a support measure for this TA for the previous four action points through the engagement of public and private sector development partners. This TA will assist in identifying where investments are needed to achieve the GMS vision in coordination with other donor initiatives for co-financing and technical services support and with agribusiness as the main implementation actors. This shall be achieved through:
- a. Promotion of policy dialogue on the core FSQ theme and digital technologies
 - b. Mechanisms for engaging the donor community
 - c. Fostering partnerships for scale
 - d. Knowledge sharing.

129. In order to operationalize all this, Mr. Ficarelli proposed to establish a GMS technical task force, details of which shall be presented by Ms. Roaring-Arunsuwannakorn. This technical task force will act as an advisory board on the key topics of (i) mutual recognition of FSQ standards, (ii) digital technologies, and (iii) knowledge sharing

130. Mr. Ficarelli concluded the presentation by encouraging a reaction from the GMS countries regarding the need for a GMS technical task force. A poll was released that solicited reaction to the following statement:

Quick Poll: It is important to set-up a GMS Task Force on Food Safety and Quality and Digitization

- Yes
- No

131. Mr. Ficarelli announced that based on the poll there was a general agreement that the task force is necessary.

4.2. Panel discussion: Views on the Proposed TA-9916 Action Plan

132. **Mr. Stewart Pittaway, TA 9916 Team Leader** facilitated the panel discussion following the session 3 presentations. He encouraged feedback from the panelists regarding the five priority areas that were identified to be pursued by TA 9916. He introduced the members of the panel and invited them to talk.

133. Dr. Suporn Pongnumkul, Senior Researcher, National Electronics and Computer Engineering Center, National Science and Technology Development Agency (NSTDA), Thailand, shared the agency's experience in blockchain-based traceability system developed for Thai coffee. One of the observations she shared was that everyone, including the companies, has data but most are not willing to share it. Meanwhile, the agency wants stakeholders including small farmers to be on board in the traceability

⁴ Based on preliminary assessment, this can include the public-private partnership with Sendo in Vietnam, Grab Mart in Thailand, or the corporate social responsibility (CSR) investment made by Pinduoduo online supermarket in PRC in engaging farmers.

⁵ Successful examples include the Go4Fresh and the Digital Green Loop apps registering tens of thousands of farmer users in India.

efforts, noting that this has been a challenge. She mentioned that blockchain presents a way for everyone in a particular value chain to share data while preserving data accuracy, providing proof of compliance and production performance thereby facilitating trust among actors within the value chain and ultimately helps consumers use the information to make informed purchase decisions.

134. In her presentation, Dr. Pongnumkul showed how a mobile device-based app for the coffee bean tracing project facilitates data sharing from the key participants in the coffee value chain. Data input would start from the farmers and the account created for that particular product will be passed on to the miller through a QR code. The miller would then input his/her data contribution then pass on the QR code to the next person in the value chain who is the roaster who will do the same and finally pass on the data to the consumer/coffee taster. The result is a blockchain-based traceability system that is transparent, verifiable and easy to use. This project has observed a couple of challenges along the way, including highland farmers' limited access to the internet and in some cases, limited access to electricity.

135. **Mr. Wonganan Sukcharoenkana, Owner, Mae Klong Distribution Company Limited and Choke Anan Farm**, shared his farm's experience during Covid-19 in 2020 and currently. His farm has been successfully producing premium vegetables in greenhouses and exporting to European countries in the last five years until Covid-19 hit. The farmers felt the brunt of the crisis with no compensation – the supply of vegetables was stuck with the farmers as the demand was hampered by the stifled logistics system (no planes to send the produce). This year, as of the time of the annual meeting, the demand for GAP and global GAP approved high-quality safe produce and logistics operations started to mobilize. In the meantime, his farm resorted to cut costs while trying to maintain the quality of produce.

136. He said that the discussion about the GAP is very beneficial to the farmers. He appreciated the pilot use of blockchain technology to establish trust directly between consumers and farmers. When asked by Mr. Pittaway about how his farm tackled the disruption of logistics during the pandemic, Mr. Sukcharoenkana explained his farm decided to sell the produce instead to the local market as his exporter was unable to cover the logistics costs that skyrocketed last year. His farm used online platforms to reach the local customers in Thailand. Farm sales only reached breakeven despite the efforts.

137. **Mr. Do Hoang Phuong, Director of Global Food, JST Company, Vietnam**, shared the experience of his lychee farm during the Covid-19 pandemic. He said the government has helped them to sell all their fresh produce (200,000 tons) amounting to over USD300 million. They also export lychee puree in the more difficult markets, namely, US, EU, Australia and Japan. The farm has been able to meet the requirements of these markets. As for traceability, the farm uses its own cultivation team and works with the farmers and local authorities to ensure the production practices within the farm meet the standards. For traceability, the farm receives an area code for the global GAP. Then the farm has been meeting regulatory requirements accordingly.

138. He also noted that clients adopt different approaches in compliance surveillance. For Japanese customers, they do not care much about the certificate but they would do factory audits and work closely with the farm to ensure it follows the right production process. European clients, on the other hand, care more about the certifications secured by the farm⁶. When asked by Mr. Pittaway which GAP was required by the PRC, Mr. Do Hoang Phuong said the buyers from PRC have different requirements. Given that, his farm offers PRC clients various product options.

139. The challenges that the farm faces include the risk of climate change that may lead to production losses and other effects (i.e., the lychee fruits ripened earlier than normal this year). Another challenge that the farm is facing is labor competition brought by the influx of investors in the economic zones that lure away the rural labor force.

⁶ Certifications like British Retail Consortium (BRC), IMS, FDA, etc.

140. **Mr. Sayakone Onnaly, General Manager, The Bolaven Plateau, Coffee Producers Cooperative, Lao PDR**, explained how their cooperative exports coffee to Canada, Europe (France, UK, Switzerland), and the US (please see Annex 8 for the copy of the presentation). He said their coffee beans follow organic standards: EU Standard, National Organic Program (NOP) standard for US and Canadian clients. The organization certifying these is Fair Trade International.

141. **Mr. Bui Ba Chinh, Executive Manager of GS1 Vietnam - MOST Directorate of Standard Metrology and Quality of Vietnam (STAMEQ)** shared the experience of national project on implementing traceability in the country. In 2019, the government approved the implementation, application and management of the traceability system with the following objectives by 2025: (i) review the national legal documents, national standards (there are 20) and all the guidelines on traceability; (ii) develop the national traceability portal - agricultural products are the first target; and (iii) deploy many traceability systems throughout Vietnam. The government has made pilots like traceability in dairy supply chains (in Dalat Milk). The government of Vietnam also entered into a cooperation agreement with CEIC of PRC to conduct traceability systems in agriculture value chains to aid in exporting produce to PRC. He said that standards are important and highlighted to work together to develop international standards on traceability. MRAs are also importantly supported by traceability to support cross-border trade.

142. **Arvind Betigeri, Regional Rice Fortification Advisor, World Food Programme**, shared what they have been doing at WFP. On food safety, WFP provides technical assistance to the government in setting up staple food fortification and strengthening the food safety and quality assurance structure with food testing laboratories and other human resource capacity development, on evidence generation and looking at how systems can be strengthened for the overall robust institutional framework for food safety and quality assurance. With UNICEF and other United Nations (UN) sister agencies, WFP is currently working on minimum standards for the implementation of mandatory food fortification in the ASEAN, currently setting up guidelines on minimum standards for mandatory implementation and food fortification in the ASEAN member states. This has been developed by the ASEAN secretariat. The whole initiative is under the chairmanship of Lao PDR.

143. Mr. Betigeri noted that while the comprehensive areas were covered by the TA9916 priorities, he advised to apply a systems lens. The agri-sector has interactions with other systems as well (i.e., financial systems as far as capital availability is concerned, transportation infrastructure, etc.). He advised looking at pre-harvest (ministry of agriculture comes into the scene) and post-harvest arrangements (ministry of health, trade and commerce, etc). However, he noted that there is no harmonization between ministries even though it is extremely critical. The middle of the value chain, he pointed out, has been where the cracks happen: there has been no horizontal interaction of the key players taking place. He said this was highlighted in the MAMRASCA presentation where 50% of wayside market actors were not aware of MAMRASCA. He posted important questions: (i) Can there be a harmonization where there is a minimal gap between the national and regional standards? (ii) Also, who will bear the responsibility? (iii) In terms of traceability, how do we position the aggregates? and (iv) Can we have a system in place at the national level and regional level wherein there is an institutional mechanism (including the private and public sectors)?

144. He expressed support to the concept of food safety and harmonization of standards task force (which he opined to be called accelerators instead of task force). He suggested a one-stop technical agency that will look at all the aspects of the value chain to aid the interaction of all the players.

145. To Mr. Betigeri's questions, Mr. Pittaway answered that the TA has several pilot initiatives that will include a mixture of elements (digitization, food safety and quality and climate-friendly responses as well). Mr. Pittaway said the TA team will look at the middle of the value chains and he assured that the TA team will certainly have a dialogue with Mr. Betigeri again on this.

4.3. Open discussion

146. Mr. Pittaway invited the panel members and WGA coordinators and focal points for any short comments on the key priorities identified under TA 9916. He also opened the floor for any questions from the participants of the meeting.

147. Mr. Betigeri responded and suggested conducting pilots that can incorporate and demonstrate how harmonization looks like when implemented on the ground.

148. In response to the question raised on the chat by Ms. Linh Tran regarding the control over the veracity of the data entered in the blockchain platform from start to finish, Dr. Pongnumkul explained that blockchain can ensure that the data inputted will not be tampered with, however, the veracity of data keyed into the system is currently a challenge. Based on current practice, people use other methods to verify the accuracy of the data (i.e., manual inspection, or having a reputation system).

149. When asked how blockchain technology would impact MAMRASCA and how it can revolutionize an approach for more efficient harmonization of standards and make agreements between the countries easier, Dr. Pongnumkul responded that blockchain is a tool to use so there is no need to trust a single party and does not have a definite answer on how this will work for MAMRASCA as yet but it has potential to revolutionize a lot of domains (MAMRASCA included) but everyone needs to work together to get there.

150. Mr. Pittaway summarized the panel discussion.

151. Dr. Srinivasan Ancha, ADB, said ASEAN is coming up with common guidelines for digital agriculture including traceability. He asked Dr. Pongnumkul what types of guidelines should be followed? Dr. Pongnumkul said she was not involved in the project and was not aware of the process.

152. To Mr. Betigeri, Dr. Ancha asked if he is aware of any development partner coordination on food safety and quality and where this TA could support to some extent (as donor coordination may also be lacking). Mr. Betigeri said along with UNICEF, FAO and other sister agencies, WFP is working on a set of guidelines for the implementation of food fortification for all the staple foods. Another project is looking at complementary foods. Within the five priority points of TA 9916, there can be a lot of harmonization of efforts among the development agencies as well.

153. Dr. Ancha asked Mr. Chen for feedback in terms of coordination as the project intends to bring together development partners and the private sector to collaborate. Mr. Chen explained that Singapore is a small city-state and it is easy to set up a model system. Moving forward will entail establishing a partnership to implement some of the technologies and establish the value-added for everyone. Mr. Chen said there is certainly a synergy. Most of the time, for food systems Nanyang Technological University's contribution is the transfer of technology and skills. The university is looking towards building some level of public-private partnership as well as implementing this blockchain solution, digitization and some sense of development, enhancing the food system through water reduction and contribute to the registration requirements, open farming, and alternative food source. So there are a lot of opportunities to work together. Dr. Ancha added that this TA will be touching the areas Mr. Chen mentioned: such as organizing policy dialogues (with governments and other stakeholders) on safety and equality, capacity building for stakeholders including demonstration. Dr. Ancha said Food Industry Asia was also invited to the annual meeting but schedule conflicts kept them from joining.

154. With digitization, the role of the private sector will be critical. Mr. Chen shared that the Singapore government will engage companies on the platform. The Nanyang Technological University can develop solutions, a channel to grow the ecosystem in terms of engaging start-ups, SMEs, etc.

155. Dr. Pongnumkul said their project is aligned with priority points 3, 4 and 5 which they fully support.
156. Mr. Dam Nguyen observed that the TA 9916 five points were called priority areas and in the presentation of Ms. Roaring-Arunsuwannakorn and Mr. Ficarelli, however they were called action points during the panel discussion. He was of the view that it should not be called action points. He also commented that the priority points were broad and sometimes ambitious. He suggested discussing further the details of these activities so everyone can see clearly what the outputs are later. Dr. Ancha agreed that there is a need for concrete actions under each priority (to avoid being too general) and to some extent, they were listed as bullet points in the presentation. Each priority will help two to three activities contributing to targets (building capacity, helping countries on policy coherence, demonstration on digital technology).
157. Ms. Roaring-Arunsuwanakorn wrapped up the discussion and thanked the team who supported the preparations for this annual event. She said ASEAN MAMRASCA is expected to contribute to regional trade and it provides the GMS a good starting point to work together towards achieving recognition for food safety and quality. Moreover, it will be worthwhile to pursue PRC equivalence of ASEAN standards. Regional market opportunities have been expanding although it is noted that this is not a panacea for buyers and there remains a lot to be done. She noted that the ASEAN GAP is very promising and having at least one harmonized standard in the GMS will be a big achievement. To get there, it is important to understand GMS level of efforts and food safety issues. She also highlighted the need for multi-agency cooperation on FSQ which can be done through a task force and everyone attending the meeting seem to be in favor of this. It is also essential to narrow the gaps in the conformity assessments. Thailand and the PRC have shown interest in supporting Cambodia and Lao PDR to be able to catch up with the conformity assessments. Pilots play an important role, a proof of concept for mutual recognition agreements. The private sector knows the market best thus they should be heard and their challenges must be recognized, as PPP and relationship building are important. She also highlighted that Vietnam's e-traceability recognition for PRC is a good example to pursue in conducting the pilots.
158. Ms. Roaring-Arunsuwanakorn reiterated that the majority believed in the role of the task force which is seen to have an accelerator role in food safety and quality and digital transformation to promote safe, sustainable, climate-friendly, pro-poor and pro-women value chains.
159. Mr. Ficarelli added that a lot of the points that were raised in this meeting resonate very well with TA team's initial assessments and support well the five action points/priority points that will become the major thrusts in the implementation of TA 9916. On the technology side, both the innovation from NSDA and OpsSmart made the very important point that technology is an enabler and that digital technology allows data sharing among the different actors. He said technology leads to the fact that shifting from analog to electronic will allow data availability hence, technology is also important in fostering FSQ.
160. Mr. Ficarelli added that it is critical for the public and private sector to come together to ensure this data sharing across the value chain actors. The GS1 standards, interoperable systems for FSQ management are fundamental. It is also important to recognize and align with the already existing national initiatives, forge partnerships, and make technology accessible to the farmers.
161. On the question of Dr. Ancha earlier regarding the ASEAN common guidelines for digital agriculture, Mr. Ficarelli answered that they are just at the initial stages and did knowledge sharing facilitated by SEARCA and they are still about to develop guidelines.

5. Presentation on GMS Task Force on Food Safety and Quality and Digital Technologies [working title] – Draft Terms of Reference

162. **Ms. Vichelle Roaring-Arunsuwanakorn, TA 9916 Food Safety and Quality Specialist**, gave a presentation on the draft terms of reference for the task force on food safety and quality and digital technologies in the GMS (see Annex 9 for the copy of the presentation). The technical task force will be useful in providing a mechanism for information exchange as a basis for strengthening policy coherence and coordination of activities among national authorities and stakeholders working on food safety and quality in the GMS.

163. As background, in 2017, the GMS countries endorsed the GMS agro-food strategy with the vision to become a leading supplier of safe, nutritious and climate-friendly agro-food products. What is needed is compliance with regional and international FSQ standards and the most practical way to start is to adopt the MAMRASCA principles which pursue mutual recognition in a phased manner as long as there is multilateral conformity, laboratory capacity that are at acceptable levels. It is possible to adopt additional agri-food standards on top of this with GAP as the most basic standard of all. MAMRASCA has two technical milestones: (i) if existing national standards are aligned with ASEAN standards based on an alignment process; (ii) if national assessment conformity national bodies can meet relevant ISO standards.

164. Harmonized FSQ standards require government departments responsible for FSQ regulations. This also needs the close participation of experts and academia and it is important to have interoperability of systems among GMS countries.

165. The technical Task Force on Food Safety, Quality and Digitization (TFSQ) will act as a technical advisory group to the WGA by providing guidance to support WGA's efforts on FSQ and related digitization in the region. It will serve as a joint platform for effective technical coordination to:

- I. foster regional dialogue and joint actions towards mutual recognition of GAP, GMP HACCP, organic standards and to pursue equivalence recognition by PRC for safe and climate-friendly agri-food products;
- II. benchmark national and ASEAN sharing of best practices, to establish trust;
- III. support efforts to narrow capacity gaps among national certification systems and obtain equivalence with international/regional standards and obtain mutual recognition by other country trade partners;
- IV. foster partnerships for enabling adoption of FSQ standards and information sharing, to identify barriers to multilateral conformity assessments;
- V. provide recommendations for upgrading laboratories to improve testing capacity and quality education;
- VI. support recognition/accreditation of testing facilities to eliminate multiple testing to meet various standards/import requirements;
- VII. Support implementation of the GMS joint action plan for adoption of MAMRASCA;
- VIII. Promote the alignment of national traceability initiatives;
- IX. Provide technical advisory inputs to conduct demonstration projects;

- X. Support joint prioritization exercises among the representatives of governments, private sector, academia and development partners; and
- XI. Regularly share information about food safety work and relevant events

166. Ms. Roaring-Arunsuwannakorn shared the text of the presentation and invited everyone to provide their comments.

167. She presented the membership and coordination mechanisms which are as follows:

168. The co-chairs are technical experts from government agencies and ADB (can be rotated among members)

169. The core members include:

- a. Government agencies: agriculture departments, health departments, industry/commerce departments, customs department, border agencies, science and technology departments
- b. Conformity assessment bodies: certification and standards agencies and laboratories

170. Extended members/partners

171. Meeting frequency: quarterly or as needed

172. Monthly event calendar and bulletin board: projects, programs, activities, sharing of reports/studies, status assessments, articles, news, meeting minutes, joint action plan

173. ADB TA 9916 shall provide secretariat support for the TFSQ, including technical, administrative and other related support.

6. Feedback and Discussion

174. **Dr. Srinivasan Ancha, Principal Climate Change Specialist, ADB** solicited feedback from the members of the WGA and meeting participants.

175. Dr. Prum Somany, Cambodia, said he has no comment in general regarding the task force but expressed concern over the many technical groups already working on the trade/ASEAN sphere (there now exists a technical working group, expert group and a task force) and creating a new one can be a little too much. The GMS has been with MAMRASCA since 2008 and the question now is if there should be a new mechanism or not. Also, he expressed concern in making ADB TA as Secretariat – if the project closes then the task force might not be able to continue. He suggested using the existing national secretariat to support the WGA in this light. Dr. Somany suggested to re-activate the secretariat chosen for the previous project (CASPII). He emphasized that if the GMS will use MAMRASCA, the most important thing to look into is PRC's position regarding the GMS' use of MAMRASCA.

176. Ms. Roaring-Arunsuwannakorn replied by sharing her discussion with Mr. Minh where he said, among the ASEAN, there is a big gap between Singapore and the smaller economies in the region hence, movement has been slow. With the task force, there is a possibility for faster action. The task force intends to have the same set of people who attend the meetings at the ASEAN level to aid facilitation. She added that with the MAMRASCA principle, there is no need for agreement among 5 countries. MAMRASCA allows agreements even between just two countries.

177. Ms. Zhang Bin, PRC, raised concerns over the creation of the task force as if so, in the PRC, more agencies have to be included and she was not sure if they are allowed to welcome so many agencies within their WGA (this will need to be clarified by Ms. Zhang). Meanwhile, she pointed out that PRC and the ASEAN have mechanisms to talk about issues over FSQ and trade agreements, probably through the current WGA, and can invite resource persons or host some of the activities. Finally, she also raised concerns about the continuity of the task force once TA 9916 comes to a close.

178. Ms. Xiang Zhou Liu said the task force may be good, however, for the PRC it may be a concern as they might need to involve other agencies/ministries, and for that, decisions may not necessarily be made by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs. For the case of the PRC, other ministries would have to be consulted before PRC can officially support the creation of the task force.

179. Dr. Ancha, ADB, recognized the concerns raised by the WGA members. He explained that there is a working group and the task force is only meant to support. He clarified that the intention was not to create a new institution, instead, create a group that will only hold an advisory role (and thus can be called a different name, i.e., expert group, specialist group, etc.). FSQ management is a multisectoral, multidisciplinary and cross-cutting subsector and because of that, there is a need to go beyond the agriculture sector. He explained that the task force will involve the same individuals in most cases who can facilitate more intensive discussions. The proposed task force (or expert group) will not necessarily be composed of new people outside the WGA whose meetings will be conducted as and when needed. Concerning Dr. Somany's suggestion to re-activate the previous secretariat, Dr. Ancha said that the reactivation may not take place due to a lack of funds. Dr. Ancha explained that the previous two phases of the project were much bigger programs compared to the ongoing TA9916. The previous phases were funded by European partners whose funding shifted to Africa. Dr. Ancha assured that once resources become available, national secretariat members shall be involved in TA9916 implementation.

180. Mr. Dam Nguyen, Vietnam, expressed concerns over involving people from the other ministries in the conduct of the task force – it may not be as easy as suggested in the context of Vietnam.

181. Dr. Ancha recognized the concerns of the WGA members and said that ADB will not impose something that is not in the interest of the GMS countries. He suggested creating a smaller group instead, mainly from the ministries of agriculture, to support the initiatives. Experts can be engaged to support this group as and when they are required. This group will no longer be called a task force due to the complexities of involving other ministries.

182. Mr. Stewart Pittaway noted that as part of the work that the TA will be doing, harmonization of standards (with GAP highlighted) is being proposed and for that, three or four more pilot demonstrations will be conducted. He requested all of the countries' support which may necessitate the involvement of other ministries (i.e., industry and commerce and maybe health departments) an example of which is the involvement of NSTDA in Thailand for the development of blockchain in traceability. The TA 9916 team will be working along these lines and would consider the WGA members' feedback as the TA pushes through with its activities.

183. Dr. Ancha reiterated that the task force will not be instituted for now and the tasks can be achieved in terms of fostering regional cooperation by primarily helping the ministries of agriculture and by bringing in experts as and when needed.

184. The WGA Coordinator of Thailand expressed alignment with the concerns earlier raised by WGA members from Cambodia, PRC, and Vietnam. This was well noted by Dr. Ancha.

7. Presentation of the Draft WGA Annual Meeting Statement

185. **Dr. Srinivasan Ancha, Principal Climate Change Specialist, ADB**, presented the Draft WGA Annual Meeting Statement. The finalized statement is in Annex 10.

186. Paragraph 1 – It was clarified that only five countries met for this 18th Annual Meeting (without representatives from Myanmar). This information was retained.

187. Paragraph 2 – No comments were raised. Paragraph was retained.

188. Paragraph 3 – Dr. Somany suggested adding “enhancing capacity of certification body, accreditation body and inspection body” to be added to “laboratory” in line 8. He also suggested including a statement saying “standardization of SOP” in paragraph 3. Dr. Ancha added the suggestions accordingly. Concerning the statement “the WGA confirmed that the GMS countries have high potential to be early adopters of MAMRASCA”, Ms. Zhang requested that PRC be taken out of this statement as it applies only to the ASEAN GMS countries. She pointed out the same concern in the last sentence. Dr. Ancha explained that all the countries have the potential and it is only a mutual recognition and conformity assessment and thus will have no legal ramifications for PRC. In a way, PRC’s support is only flagged in this statement. Mr. Pittaway suggested indicating ‘GMS ASEAN countries’ instead of ‘GMS countries’ to address the concerns of Ms. Zhang.

189. Paragraph 4 – Dr. Somany pointed out that as GAP is a voluntary standard it requires registration and fees. If GAP certification is to be required from smallholders, it may be a burden for them. Dr. Ancha edited the statement to adequately address Dr. Somany’s concerns. Ms. Moni Ratana Mao (TA 9916 deputy team leader) asked if TA 9916 will support HACCP and GMP. Dr. Ancha answered yes as the project will involve the whole value chain.

190. Paragraph 5 – Ms Zhang raised the concern and reservation to say this is achievable in 5 years. Dr. Ancha edited accordingly.

191. Paragraph 6 – Mr. Jiang Feng Jiang asked if the next GMS Ministers of Agriculture Meeting date would be left for the next WGA Members to decide? Dr. Somany expressed the need to mention the next WGA meeting even if this paragraph gets deleted. Ms. Liu Xiangzhou agreed to delete this paragraph as well. Mr. Ancha has moved to delete this paragraph without identifying the date for the next WGA agriculture ministers’ meeting.

192. Paragraph 7 – No comments were raised. The paragraph was retained.

193. Paragraph 8 – Dr. Ancha asked Vietnam representatives if they are amenable to hosting the 19th Annual Meeting of the WGA. Mr. Dam Nguyen confirmed Vietnam will host the next annual meeting.

8. Final Expression of the GMS WGA Representatives

194. Dr. Prum Somany (Cambodia) thanked the hosts for a fruitful meeting. He requested ADB to provide more assistance and support for implementing the strategy for promoting the safe and environment-friendly agriculture value chains in the GMS as well as the action plan. He asked ADB to support the demonstration pilots and capacity building of the institutions working on food safety for Cambodia (certification and accreditation bodies as well as for the laboratories).

195. Ms. Zhang Bing (PRC) thanked all the hosts of the Annual Meeting. She was hopeful about the progress in pushing for a more vibrant trade and rural development through TA 9916. With the support from ADB and the TA team she was confident that the development of agriculture in the GMS will become better. She hoped that the TA will be implemented more efficiently and make achievements in a shorter time.

196. Mr. Samlan (Director of the Economic Division, Lao PDR) spoke on behalf of Dr. Thatsaka Saphangthaong. He said that the government has focused on agricultural commodity production and is expecting to expand exports especially to PRC as the train from Kunming, China to Vientiane will be opened this year. He expressed support for the priorities of TA 9916 especially the capacity building for mutual recognition and safety of agri-food products and development of digital technologies for traceability. He noted the importance of MAMRASCA and the benchmark for food safety and quality. He finally thanked Thailand for hosting the event and ADB for its support to the annual meeting.

197. Ms. Preyanat Thiabratana (Thailand) expressed a need for a mechanism for coordination and communication for the demonstration system of cross-border trade to identify bottlenecks to be addressed later on. As food systems are important in the GMS, she said that the governments must continue to find ways and means to ensure functional food systems in the region. She requested the TA team to provide enough time for the GMS member countries for their internal process for delivering the subject matter. With the guidance of GMS member countries and ADB, she expressed confidence that the TA will run efficiently and effectively.

198. Mr. Nguyen Dam (Vietnam) thanked ADB for the fruitful meeting. He also thanked Thailand for hosting the event. He mentioned that a lot of ideas were shared for FSQ and food value chains. Among the five key priorities proposed under TA 9916, he highlighted the potential of priority three (development of digital technologies for traceability). He expressed his anticipation to work with the TA team.

9. Wrap Up and Summary of the Meeting

199. Dr. Srinivasan Ancha, ADB, said he was of the view that the meeting has been successful. He summarized the results of the discussions as follows.

200. In the first session, the priorities in reintegrating particularly in the context of Covid-19 and climate change were discussed. Prospects of the GMS member countries to be the early adopters of MAMRASCA were also discussed as well as related challenges and solutions. The roles of the public and private sectors were reviewed in light of FSQ management and the consensus was for the government to enforce the regulations, invest in capacity building and facilities for monitoring, and adopt more advanced technologies for traceability and data sharing. Meanwhile, the private sector is expected to comply with the standards and promote intra- and inter-regional trade.

201. Covid-19 recovery efforts were also discussed as well as actively engaging development partners and the private sector in addressing the TA 9916 priorities. He added the countries and the stakeholders must be encouraged, rather than penalized, in the adoption of the practices. Businesses need to be empowered to enable them to adequately impose FSQ management. The FSQ systems are critical and encompass multi-ministerial efforts and so the GMS has been encouraged to have a systems perspective. Everyone was encouraged to think inclusivity, whether in terms of smallholders, women and vulnerable populations and ensure all these stakeholders are benefiting from improved FSQ practices. With that, the GMS will not only contribute to the recovery from Covid-19 but also the achievement of sustainable development goals and address climate change.

202. The governments truly need to encourage and empower the businesses rather than penalize the private sector in terms of adaptation of good practices in FSQ management as it was recognized that there is no lead agency when it comes to food safety and quality management.

203. It was recognized that, currently, there is no lead agency for the FSQ management in all the GMS countries and that remains a challenge. The ministry of agriculture alone cannot achieve all the objectives of food safety and risk management. Other ministries and departments - the ministry of health, ministry of commerce, ministry of trade must be engaged. Since there is no lead ministry, it has been a challenge to make much progress despite the agreement that the region needs safe and better quality food traded within its borders.

204. The countries were encouraged to think of every stage in the value chain – MAMRASCA seems to focus mainly on production, but everyone is encouraged to consider the other stages of the value chain. Everyone was encouraged to be proactive rather than reactive to the risks like those brought about by climate change (i.e., countries need to anticipate food risks). Opportunities in terms of promoting regional trade must also be seized.

205. He noted that so far, everyone was mainly focusing on SPS capacity strengthening from a trade perspective, but he opined that the region needs to shift the focus towards food safety management and quality. Upgrading from policing to facilitating the complaints is being encouraged. There is a need to build confidence among the private sector as well as smallholder producers in terms of good agricultural practices and the ability of the laboratories and accreditation bodies to build the human capital and adequately conduct assessments. Work needs to be done to increase the awareness of the private sector and smallholder farmers. He remarked that there is still much to be done.

10. Concluding Remarks

206. **Dr. Jiangfeng Zhang** (ADB) delivered the concluding remarks. He expressed appreciation for the dedication of the meeting as well as the meeting participants' willingness to share experiences and ideas. He thanked the speakers, the resource persons and moderators for all their efforts during the meeting. He also thanked the GMS WGA Coordinator and focal points. Sound insights and knowledge were throughout the extent of the annual meeting and these will help ADB and the TA Team implement TA 9916 better especially during these challenging times in light of the Covid-19 situation as well as climate change.

207. Mr. Zhang said that this TA, there are other agenda that needs to be covered and ADB continues forward to work closely with the GMS WGA in addressing the other issues on agriculture, the food system, and transformation in the region (recalling the example of the Seam Reap Action Plan). Mr. Zhang mentioned that in addition to TA 9916, ADB and the governments are working on other TAs to support the GMS regional agriculture value chain strategy, examples include the ongoing GMS climate-friendly agribusiness value chain project and the GMS cross border livestock health and value chain improvement project (which are being implemented in some of the countries).

208. Mr. Zhang requested the WGA coordinators' help by working together to identify more investment projects for each country to strengthen the support to the GMS regional agriculture value chains strategy and specifically address the issue of food safety and quality. He mentioned a few areas that were highlighted during the meeting, namely, intervention of high technologies and the coordination and cooperation across the ministries as well as between the public and the private sectors. He encouraged everyone to work together in the implementation of the TA (Mr. Zhang highlighted the example in Cambodia where ADB implemented one agriculture value chain competitiveness and safety enhancement project and the key agenda of the project was to support the laboratories. Similarly, Mr. Zhang expressed his anticipation to work with other GMS nations on similar projects.

209. Dr. Zhang expressed appreciation to the government of Thailand, in particular, the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives for hosting this annual meeting. Finally, Dr. Zhang expressed appreciation to the consultants of Landell Mills as well as ADB colleagues, Dr. Srinivasan Ancha, Ms. Criselda Rufino, and Mr. Steve Calingacion for their contribution and hard work.

210. Ms. Benjawan Siribhodi (Thailand) delivered the concluding remarks on behalf of Deputy Permanent Secretary Rapibhat Chandarasrivongs of the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, Thailand. She thanked the meeting presenters, resource persons, moderators, and all the participants to the annual meeting for their valuable contributions in the spirit of cooperation. She also thanked the secretariat for the efforts. This meeting has endeavored to ensure the climate-friendly, safety and sustainability of the agri-food value chains in the GMS region even in the middle of the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic, climate change, and natural disasters. She encouraged cross synergies among stakeholders and resources to further increase the effectiveness and efficiency in transforming the meeting discussions into creative action and best practices as soon as possible. The result of the GMS cooperation and efforts shall support the export of GMS agri-food products to high-value markets, ensuring GMS countries' connectivity within the region and globally. The food value chain can be better developed to make a higher contribution in driving the economies of the GMS countries. She closed by expressing anticipation to working with the participants in the future fora and wished for everyone's safety and good health as she declared the 18th annual meeting closed.

211. As a parting message, Mr. Stewart Pittaway, Team Leader, TA 9916 said, in light of the inception report recently presented and concluded in a previous workshop and with the closing of the 18th annual meeting, the TA Team is moving forward with the project implementation towards the pilot demonstrations

and capacity building programs. Accordingly, the TA Team will start dialogues with the WGA members and various departments. He also announced the upcoming Covid-19 workshop would take place in the last week of August, as the workshop is included in the list of TA deliverable outputs. The TA implementation is expected to commence on the 12th of July 2021.

11. List of Annexes

- Annex 1:** 18th Annual Meeting of the Greater Mekong Subregion Working Group on Agriculture Agenda
- Annex 2:** Priorities for Reinvigorating the GMS Agri-Food Sector in the Context of Covid-19 and Climate Change (presented by Ms. Zhang Bin)
- Annex 3:** Multilateral Arrangement for the Mutual Recognition of Agri-food Standards and Conformity Assessment (presentation by Dr. Pham Quang Minh)
- Annex 4:** Harmonization of FSQ Standards in the GMS – Private Sector Perspectives (presentation on KCFresh by Mr. Chusak Chuenprayoth)
- Annex 5:** Harmonization of FSQ Standards in the GMS – Private Sector Perspectives (presentation on The Big Trading Co., Ltd. by Dr. Phuwakji Rungtiwakornkij)
- Annex 6:** Panel Member Discussion Paper: China's Safety and Quality Requirements for Imported Agriculture Products (presented by Mr. Chen Qisheng)
- Annex 7:** GMS TA 9916 – Sustainable Agriculture and Food Security Program – Plan of Actions to Support the GMS Food Safety and Quality Harmonization, Traceability and Digital Technologies (presentation by Ms. Vichelle Roaring-Arunsuwannakorn and Pier Paolo Ficarelli)
- Annex 8:** Panel Member Discussion Presentation: Coffee Producers Cooperative (CPC) – An organization to improve living conditions of Lao coffee smallholders (presentation by Mr. Sayakone Onnaly, The Bolaven Plateau, Coffee Producers Cooperative, Lao PDR)
- Annex 9:** Draft Terms of Reference of the Task Force on Food Safety, Quality and Digitization in the Greater Mekong Subregion (presentation by Ms. Vichelle Roaring-Arunsuwannakorn)
- Annex 10:** 18th Annual Meeting of the Greater Mekong Subregion Working Group on Agriculture Record of Discussion (presented by Mr. Srinivasan Ancha)
- Annex 11:** Why Gender Matters in Food Safety (presentation handouts prepared by Ms. Bodil Warming)