



SAFE Initiative

# Arab Food Safety Initiative

FOR TRADE FACILITATION



# Arab Food Safety Initiative for Trade Facilitation



# Content

Chapter 1	The Regional Food Safety Context	6
Chapter 2	SAFE at a Glance	8
Chapter 3	Regional Initiatives	10
	About the Arab Task Force on Food Safety	10
	Institutional Capacity-Building and Legal Reforms	14
Chapter 4	National Initiatives	16
	About the Country Support Programmes	16
Chapter 5	Cross-cutting initiatives	18

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# 1. The Regional Food Safety Context

In an emerging era of duty-free trade, effectively getting to grips with food safety and food standards issues will be vital to the promotion of both inter- and intra-regional trade. This is not simply a technical issue of standards, but also has important economic dimensions. By moving towards common regional standards and regulatory frameworks for food, economies of scale can be gained in making the necessary investment in standards compliance, and regional markets can hence become a platform for the penetration of international market.

The Arab region has had one of the lowest levels of intra-regional trade despite preferential market access provided under the Pan Arab Free Trade Agreement (PAFTA). The potential exists, but is untapped, and analysis shows that by removing remaining obstacles to trade, there is potential to increase total trade of member states by 10% and to create at least 2 million jobs.

Fifty four percent (54%) of the Non-Tariff Measures (NTMs) in the regions are mainly related to technical barriers to trade (TBT) and sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures, which has a negative impact on intra-regional trade, especially in food and agricultural products.

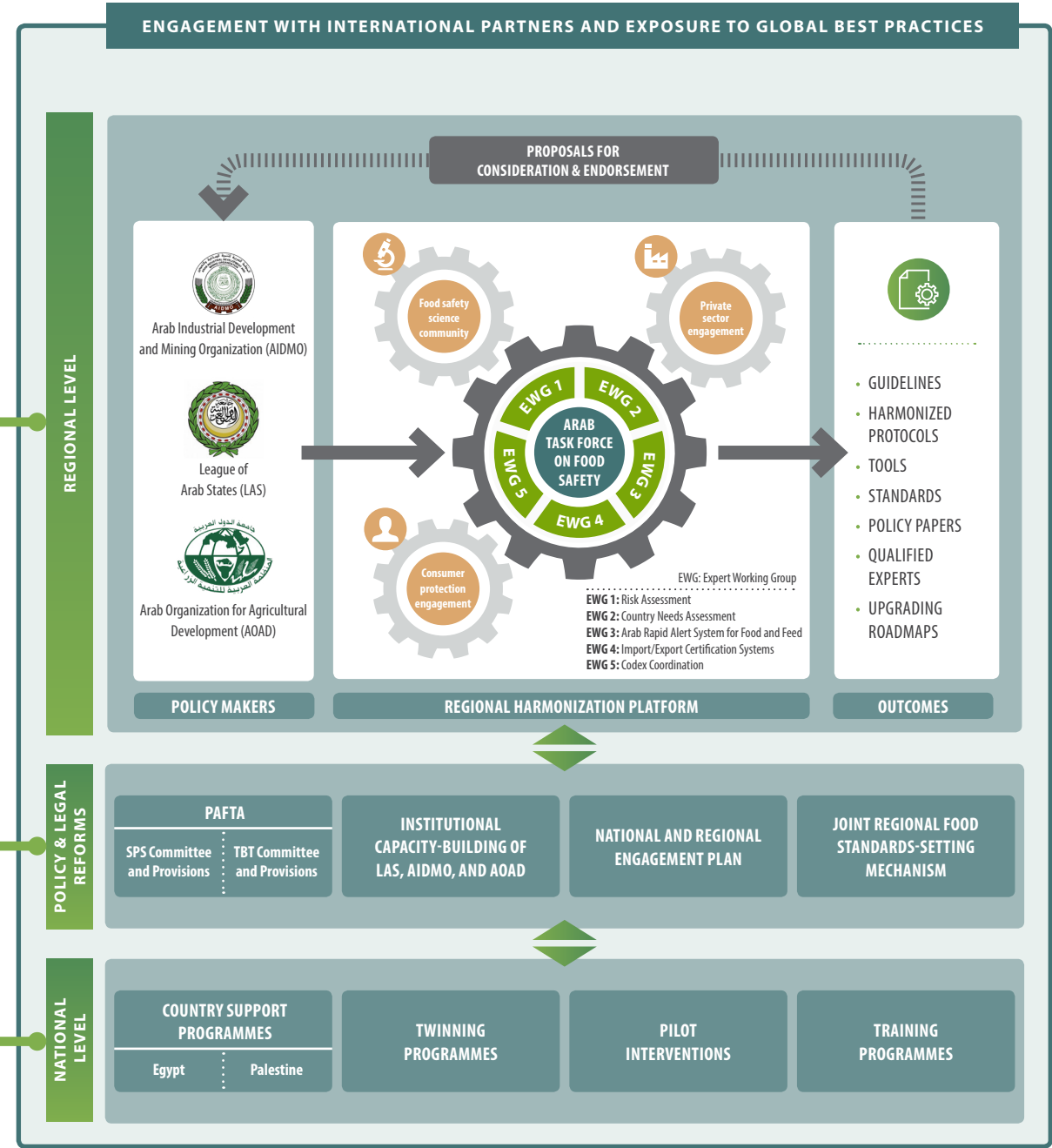
Although several countries in the Arab region have taken steps to upgrade their national food control systems, the capacity and efficiency of many countries still need to be enhanced in order to assure an adequate surveillance of locally produced and imported food, as well as to demonstrate compliance with food standards in export markets. Therefore, regional cooperation and harmonization among member states of the League of Arab states (LAS) is critical for the successful execution of the PAFTA agreement, and key potential benefits for LAS member countries include those listed on next page.



## 2. SAFE at a glance

In efforts to address the Arab region's intra-regional trade challenge, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) is implementing the project "Enhancement of Regional Trade Capacities in Food through Harmonized Regional Conformity Assessment and Food Safety Systems", known as the "SAFE initiative" which is funded by the Kingdom of Sweden.

The initiative is implemented in partnership with the League of Arab States (LAS) and its specialized agencies namely, the Arab Industrial Development and Mining Organization (AIDMO) and the Arab Organization for Agricultural Development (AOAD). At national level, SAFE works with various counterparts such as national standard bodies, national food control Authorities and relevant Ministries, and related national regulatory institutions engaged with food safety. SAFE has been designed to encompass several regional initiatives with the aim to structure some pivotal functions of coordination of food control systems in the Arab region, such as the food safety standard setting function and the underpinning risk assessment activities, a common rapid alert system to exchange information and report food and feed incidents, and the development of common approaches to the issuance of food import /export certificates and associated procedures.



# 3. Regional Initiatives

## ABOUT THE ARAB TASK FORCE ON FOOD SAFETY

With the aim of establishing a dedicated and sustainable regional structure on food safety under the Pan Arab Free Trade Agreement (PAFTA), a regional harmonization platform was established with the Arab Task Force on Food Safety (ATF) operating as intergovernmental committee that is supported by a secretariat, and five Expert Working Groups (EWGs). Eventually

the ATF is a specialized high level steering group formed by SAFE and its partners, with the main responsibility to provide advice and guidance to LAS, AIDMO, and AOAD on the enhancement of coordination and harmonization of food safety interventions in the Arab region. By the end of the project, six rounds of harmonization cycles will be completed.

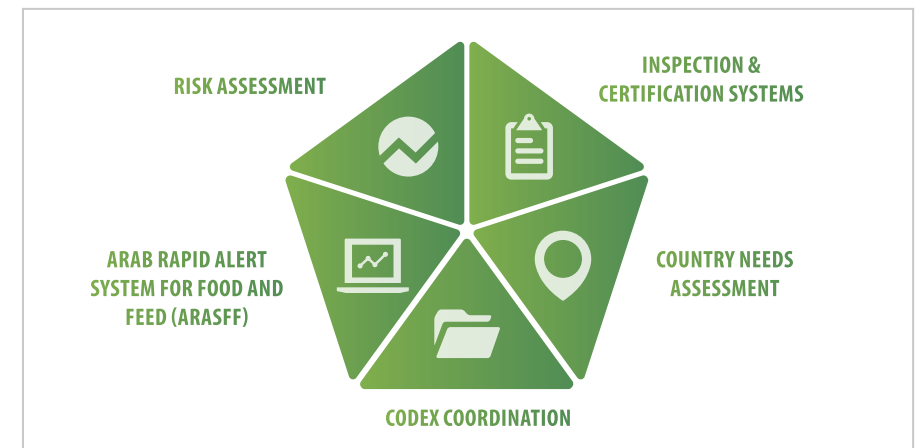
### Mandate and objectives of the ATF

<p><b>1</b></p> <p><b>To advise and recommend</b> areas of priority for coordination of food safety interventions and food safety standards harmonization</p>	<p><b>2</b></p> <p><b>To provide advice</b> on coordination mechanisms to be harnessed or developed in support of food safety standards harmonization, including those mechanisms led by stakeholders.</p>	<p><b>3</b></p> <p><b>To engage</b> with the stakeholder community (regulators, industry, food science community, consumer groups) in countries of the LAS, and guiding coordination of food safety interventions.</p>	<p><b>4</b></p> <p><b>To engage</b> with leading international organizations responsible for food safety and develop relevant collaborative mechanisms to promote the food safety agenda across the Arab region.</p>
<p><b>5</b></p> <p><b>To appoint</b> to LAS on progress related to the implementation of enhanced and coordinated food safety interventions leading to harmonized food safety standards to be adopted in the Arab region.</p>	<p><b>6</b></p> <p><b>To report</b> areas of priority for coordination of food safety interventions and food safety standards harmonization.</p>	<p><b>7</b></p> <p><b>To develop</b> guidelines, protocols, tools, standards, policy papers.</p>	<p><b>8</b></p> <p><b>To submit</b> proposals/ recommendations to LAS, AIDMO and AOAD, for consideration and endorsement.</p>

## About the Expert Working Groups

Aiming at forming a strong technical arm of the regional harmonization platform, it was in 2016 when five Expert Working Groups (EWGs) were established, comprising more than 45 representatives from national food safety authorities in the Arab region. Their scope of work is guided by five key priority areas, which were

identified by the ATF members, and each EWG is tasked with the formulation and implementation of roadmaps to further support the food safety-related harmonization process in the five fields illustrated below. Overall, each EWG functions under the umbrella of national food safety competent authorities of the lead country.



**EWG 1: Arab Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (ARASFF)**

**Objective**

To develop a harmonized mechanism to facilitate information and document exchange on the safety of food and feed in the Arab region.

**Lead country**

Saudi Arabia



**Member countries**

Algeria, Lybia, Qatar

**Number of members: 8**



**EWG 2: Risk Assessment**

**Objective**

To develop a common Arab food safety risk assessment approach, to support a sustainable and consistent coordination and harmonization of food safety standards in the Arab region, in alignment with international best practices.

**Lead country**

Morocco



**Member countries**

Algeria, Lebanon, Qatar, Tunisia, Jordan, KSA

**Number of members: 12**



**EWG 3: Inspection and Certification Systems**

**Objective**

To establish a harmonized process of developing and applying common import and export certificates, in line with Codex standards, particularly guidelines on public and official certificate certification formats (CAC/GL38-2001). In addition, the objective is to capitalize on successful regional and international best practices.

**Lead country**

Jordan



**Member countries**

Egypt, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Yemen

**Number of members: 9**



**EWG 4: Codex Coordination**

**Objective**

To improve food safety and facilitate trade by enhancing the contribution of Arab countries and their impact on the Codex Alimentarius activities, being the international entity designated to develop food international standards.

**Lead country**

Lebanon



**Member countries**

Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Yemen, Iraq, Oman

**Member organizations**

FAO, AIDM, AOAD

**Number of members: 16**



**EWG 5: Country Needs Assessment**

**Objective**

To explore the development and implementation of a tool that assesses the current status of the regulatory framework for food safety and food control systems in Arab countries, in order to identify priority areas for investment in the development of regulatory capacities in food safety. The tool will aim to further enhance the use of existing tools and methodologies, in order to better suit the pattern of food production and consumption in Arab countries.

**Lead country**

Egypt



**Member countries**

Morocco, Palestine, Sudan, Tunisia

**Member organizations**

AOAD-FAO

**Number of members: 8**



## INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY-BUILDING AND LEGAL REFORMS

With the aim of establishing a dedicated and sustainable regional structure on food safety under the Pan Arab Free Trade Agreement (PAFTA), a regional harmonization platform was established with the Arab Task Force on Food Safety (ATF) operating as intergovernmental committee that is supported by a secretariat, and five Expert Working Groups (EWGs). Eventually

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### League of Arab States and PAFTA

Since the start of the project, the core team of the Economic Integration Department (EID) of the LAS has been benefitting from receiving technical capacity-building support and from having continuously been provided with strategic advice by a group of subject experts. Following these years of intensive dialogues and capacity-building, it was in February 2018 when SAFE initiated, in collaboration with the League of Arab States (LAS), a series of workshops in the Arab region, with the aim of bringing the process of integrating SPS/TBT provisions into the Pan-Arab Free Trade Area (PAFTA) a step closer to reality. The target was to achieve convergence among all relevant regional


authorities involved in SPS and TBT matters and to voice the critical need for the establishment of SPS and TBT regimes in the Arab region. The outcome of these workshops was a set of technical recommendations, backed up by LAS member states, and this eventually paved the way for the official establishment of a SPS and TBT Committee within LAS and the official adoption of PAFTA SPS/TBT provisions. By this the PAFTA will be upgraded to a more comprehensive trade agreement which will be further aligned to international best practices and which will advance the facilitation of trade and the enhancement of consumer protection in the region.


### The Arab Organization for Agricultural Development and the Arab Industrial Development and Mining Organization


Considering the role of AIDMO who is the technical implementation partner for any TBT-related work within LAS, SAFE collaborated with AIDMO in order to enhance the capacities and engagement of relevant officials who are dealing with the technical aspects of TBT, including its commercial and legal dimensions. Any capacity-building initiative initiated within SAFE and in collaboration with AIDMO was fully in line with the Arab Strategy for Standardization and Quality 2014-2018, which was prepared by AIDMO, and also included in its strategy for 2019-2023. AIDMO eventually also became an active member of the TBT committee that was established within the LAS.



Complementary to the work of AIDMO, AOAD gets considered as the technical implementation arm for any SPS-related work within LAS, and as a first step the SAFE project hence facilitated an assessment of the organization, aiming at identifying AOAD's potential role in SPS in the Arab region. In line with the identified upgrading needs, SAFE conducted several capacity-building initiatives with AOAD which aimed at raising awareness of relevant Arab officials who are dealing with the technical aspects of SPS, as well as that their knowledge on the commercial and legal dimensions were strengthened. AOAD eventually also became an active member of the SPS committee that was established within the LAS.

## ECOSOC resolutions

**6th September**  **ECOSOC Ministerial meeting #102**  
Resolution on PAFTA  
4.1 Supporting the proposal of the LAS Secretariat on the importance of upgrading PAFTA to include SPS and TBT files.  
4.2 Requesting the implementation and follow-up committee to upgrade the legal and regulatory framework of PAFTA by establishing the technical committees needed to prepare the complementary annexes to the PAFTA and to align them with the WTO and other regional agreements.

**15-18 December**  **Implementation and Follow-up Committee meeting #46**  
Decisions concerning the follow-up in regard to the implementation of ECOSOC resolutions that are related to the PAFTA  
1. The formulation of four technical committees under the implementation and follow-up committee as follows:  
(a) PAFTA TBT committee: The committee comprises the PAFTA member states in addition to AIDMO, and the committee is entitled to invite whoever might be relevant to participate in its meetings. Main mandate of the committee:  
(1) Drafting a legal text on TBT as an annex to the PAFTA.  
(2) The continuous coordination with other committees under the implementation and follow-up committee as well as other committees and bodies under LAS.  
(b) PAFTA SPS committee: The committee comprises the PAFTA member states in addition to AOAD, and the committee is entitled to invite whoever might be relevant to participate in its meetings.  
Main mandate of the committee:  
(1) Drafting a legal text on SPS as an annex to the PAFTA.  
(2) The continuous coordination with other committees under the implementation and follow-up committee as well as other committees and bodies under LAS.

**5th September**  **ECOSOC Ministerial meeting #104**  
Resolution on PAFTA  
(a) Approval of the report and recommendations of the 47th meeting of the implementation and follow-up committee, dated 20th June 2019, including its reports on the ATF work.  
(b) The agreement to continue/sustain the work and activities of the ATF under the umbrella of the implementation and follow-up committee.



## 4. National Initiatives

### ABOUT THE COUNTRY SUPPORT PROGRAMMES

In parallel to the work undertaken at regional level, the SAFE initiative supported also two dedicated national country support programmes, which allowed Egypt and Palestine to exclusively benefit from complimentary national technical assistance programmes, targeting specific improvements to food control systems of recipient Arab region countries.

While the focus of the intervention in Egypt was on contributing towards the enhancement of the

operations and programs of the newly created food safety agency, the National Food Safety Agency of Egypt (NFSA), the support to Palestine was aiming at strengthening the inspection capacities of the Ministry of Health.

Furthermore, the project provided support to other ATF member countries by providing country-specific trainings, assessments, technical support, twinning arrangement and overall capacity-building.

### Country Support Program for Egypt



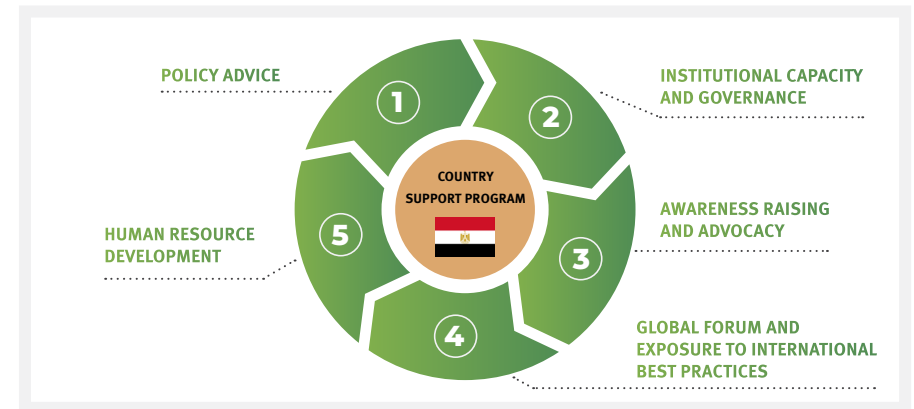
The Government of Egypt has taken major steps in line with its ambitious mandate of reforming the country's food safety regulatory framework. One of the principal achievements was the establishment of the National Food Safety Authority of Egypt (NFSA). The Agency was given the authority and mandate to be the sole regulator of food products, post-harvest and post-slaughter.

Subsequent to the establishment of NFSA, a joint Declaration was signed in 2017 between the Government of Egypt and the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), as the agency responsible for the implementation of SAFE, for a provision of technical assistance to Egypt on food safety under SAFE's 'Country Support Program'. This support was dedicated to enhance the capacity of NFSA, and it covers

areas of intervention such as policy advice, the development of institutional capacity and a governance structure, training and competency enhancement of human resources and NFSA's new talent, as well as contribution to exposure to best international food regulatory practices.



CSP Egypt NFSA



### Country Support Program for Palestine



The Country Support Program for Palestine was designed to complement a large-scale project of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations which is focusing on establishing a risk-based inspection system for food safety. The objective of the SAFE intervention was hence to provide technical assistance and contribute to ongoing Palestinian efforts in strengthening the inspection capacities of the Ministry of

Health and its partners, aimed at providing state of the art inspection services for food to the local population and the private sector and at providing dedicated training sessions. In this regard UNIDO and the Government of Palestine, represented by the Ministry of Health, signed in 2018 a Joint Declaration, which outlined the scope of the intervention.

### Country-specific interventions in other ATF member countries

Besides the dedicated country support programmes that were implemented in Egypt and Palestine, the SAFE project supported

also individual and targeted country specific interventions in other ATF member countries such as the following:

- An in-depth assessment of the national food control systems of Tunisia and Sudan where the detailed FAO/WHO needs assessment tool was applied under the management of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations;
- Benchmarking of the import and export inspection and certification systems of Jordan, Morocco and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia;
- An in-depth capacity enhancement programme for 14 risk assessors from ten countries from the region (i.e. Egypt, Iraq, KSA, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Qatar, Sudan, Tunisia);
- International exposure and participation of selected representatives from various countries in relevant international conferences and engagement between Arab food regulators and international counterparts from the public and private sector; etc.

## 5. Cross-cutting initiatives



### PRIVATE SECTOR ENGAGEMENT

The “Private Sector Engagement” initiative was launched by SAFE in 2017, with the key objective to strengthen the involvement, engagement and representation of the Arab food private sector, in order to strengthen its role and maximize its contribution to the development, harmonization, and convergence of food safety regulatory measures and standards in the Arab region.

To facilitate the implementation of this initiative, the SAFE project developed the “Private Sector Engagement Roadmap”. The scope of cooperation included among others the conduct of a survey among major food companies in the region with the aim of identifying key trade impediments related to food safety and corresponding solutions, and the facilitation of a private sector forum on food safety and trade facilitation. These interventions were implemented in partnership with the Union of Arab Chambers (UAC), the Arab Federation of Food Industries (AFFI), and the Arab Beverages Association (ABA).

### CONSUMER PROTECTION ENGAGEMENT

SAFE supported the efforts of LAS in securing full representation of the LAS established Arab Task Force on Consumer Protection at the ATF harmonization rounds. The task force brings together the national consumer protection agencies from the region with the mandate to represent consumer interests with the work done at LAS on the Pan Arab Free Trade Area (PAFTA).

The “Arab Consumer Protection Expert Team” was established by SAFE in 2018, to effectively involve regional consumer protection agencies, through direct collaboration with the respective organizations in the Arab region, and with the aim of supporting their involvement and representation in the regional food safety coordination mechanism.

### FOOD SAFETY SCIENCE COMMUNITY

The “Food Safety Science Community” is a SAFE-initiative launched in early 2017, with the key objective of capitalizing on the knowledge and expertise offered by Arab academia as well as science and technology institutions. To achieve this objective, SAFE developed the “Arab Food Safety Scientists (AFSS) Platform”, in partnership with the Arab Science and Technology Foundation (ASTF), the Association of Arab Universities (AAU), and the International Life Science Institute – Middle East (ILSI).

This web-based portal got developed to bring together food safety scientists of Arab-origin operating within the region and beyond. It targets a wide audience of stakeholders in the Arab region such as governments, universities, science and technology institutions, as well as the private sector, with the objective to provide a facilitated access, reach, and communication with and between a pool of food safety scientists across various fields and industries. To register and find out more about the AFSS Platform, visit the official website at <http://afssplatform.com/>



Arab Food Industries Forum on food Safety and Trade Facilitation



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Enhancement of  
Regional Trade  
Capacities in Food  
through Harmonized  
Regional Conformity  
Assessment and Food  
Safety Systems.



جامعة الدول العربية  
League of Arab States



SWEDEN



UNITED NATIONS  
INDUSTRIAL DEVELOPMENT ORGANIZATION



المنظمة العربية للتنمية الصناعية والمعادن  
Arab Industrial Development  
and Mining Organization



المنظمة العربية للتجارة  
والصناعة  
والزراعة  
والغذاء  
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SAFE Initiative

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