



Articles & Commentaries



p-Guru



by K.V.R. Raju, Agribusiness Director of the National Productivity Council (NPC), Kolkata, India. Prior to this, he served in various capacities including Director of NPC Headquarters in New Delhi for 25 years.

Making Food Safety a Mass Movement: Overview of Challenges for Developing Countries

The globalization of food trade has necessitated a transnational system for food production. As a result, international sourcing of raw materials is increasing, and the need for food safety throughout the food chain has become obvious. Food safety, apart from being a fundamental right of consumers, is also becoming a source of competitiveness and a symbol of national pride.

Developing countries with a strong agricultural base and growing food-processing industry such as India have the potential to become breadbaskets of the world provided they respond to food safety concerns. However, it will be a formidable challenge for Indian policymakers to tackle the huge variety of food safety-related issues in the context of the country's sheer size, diversity, and complexity of food markets. India has tried to create some islands of excellence in, for example, the dairy sector by launching nationwide annual food safety and hygiene audits of dairy plants. The National Productivity Council is a partner in those efforts. But unless they are transformed into a mass movement inculcating food safety concerns and consciousness among all sectors and the general public, a significant nationwide impact will not be felt.

The million-dollar question is how can a mass food safety movement be developed? What are the impending constraints and challenges? Which policy prescriptions are available? A cursory look at the structure of the food-processing sector in many developing countries including India shows that it is dominated by microenterprises and SMEs. Home-based units also dominate in products like condiments and traditional and ethnic food. It is thus imperative for policy prescriptions to address these sectors before an impact on the overall food safety scenario is felt.

The introduction of new technology and/or modern food safety management systems in SMEs differs from that in larger enterprises because of their small size and restricted access to resources and knowledge. As modern technology and management systems dealing with food safety are demanding, it is unfair to expect SMEs to modernize on their own. In addition, the limited data available on immediate, tangible returns from investments in modern technology and

management force SMEs to think twice.

The business culture and consumer participation are two key factors determining the success or failure of food safety campaigns. The business culture is simply the attitude of entrepreneurs toward all stakeholders in the food supply chain. Ideally, that culture should be characterized by the ability to welcome and adjust to change, efforts for excellence, and putting consumers' best interest at the top of the business agenda. An ideal policy environment should inspire the food industry, especially the SME sector, to adopt the best possible food safety assurance practices not only to gain a competitive edge but also to fulfill its social responsibility. This means that a thorough understanding of country-specific business cultures is essential before launching large-scale food safety campaigns. In large, diverse countries like India, an understanding of region/province-specific business cultures is required.

Export-driven food enterprises in developing countries usually adopt modern food safety management practices from compulsion rather than conviction. It is hard to find an enterprise that follows uniform food safety management practices for both domestic and international consumers. While it is understandable that enterprises respond to target-market requirements, a dual food safety policy will not pay in the long run. Harmonizing domestic food safety standards and practices with international ones is one policy instrument available to make food safety campaigns more credible and effective. Developed countries can also lend a helping hand by accepting Codex Alimentarius standards and not insisting on more stringent ones, which creates technical barriers. The business philosophy of classifying consumers based on their quality-consciousness and responding accordingly is the bane of the food industry as well as policymakers in developing countries because it adversely affects the credibility of food safety campaigns.

Food safety records are invariably poor when consumers are ill informed, unorganized, and not vocal. Mass food safety movements are, to paraphrase the definition of democracy, for consumers, by consumers, and of consumers. Their success can only be ensured with active consumer involvement. Most food campaigns fail because they are excessively controlled by government functionaries with little or no involvement of consumers or consumers' organizations. The organization and empowerment of consumers coupled with timely redress of grievances form an integral part of any meaningful food safety movement. While consumers have every right to expect uncompromising food safety standards at competitive prices, they must also be ready to pay extra to encourage the food industry in the initial stages of market development.

A coherent, proactive policy is perhaps the most critical factor in a visible, vibrant, effective food safety movement. Countries in the Asia-Pacific have responded to the food safety issues in different ways. Thailand, which is widely acknowledged as a success story, relied on seamless food safety awareness campaigns and launched a series of training, incentive, and certification programs for both the export and domestic markets. The financial crisis of 1997 was a blessing in disguise for the food industry in Thailand as the government went all out to gain access to global food markets. In the process, the government assigned specific tasks to departments and agencies to improve food quality and safety through modern food safety management systems. Proactive, innovative measures such as the provision of low-interest credit and a 200% tax deduction campaign to implement modern food safety management systems paid rich dividends in the long term, putting Thailand high on the list of

prominent food exporters. Thailand is a good example for other countries in the region to follow, with adjustments for local conditions.

Sri Lanka, on the other hand, has concentrated mainly on the seafood and meat-processing industry, which caters to export markets and earns valuable foreign exchange. As a result, Sri Lanka has successfully penetrated the global market, especially Europe, and has had a sustained presence, in sharp contrast to the problems faced by other countries in South Asia.

India was slow to grapple with food safety. The Food Safety and Standards Act was passed and the Food Safety Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) was established only in 2006. The main objectives were to introduce a single statute relating to food and provide for scientific development of the food-processing industry. The act moved India from multilevel, multidepartmental control to a single line of command on food safety. It incorporates the salient provisions of the Prevention of Food Adulteration Act 1954 and was based on international legislation, instruments, and the Codex Alimentations Commission. The focus of the act is on integrating national food safety laws to develop the food-processing industry systematically and scientifically and shift from a regulatory regime to self-compliance. As part of the consolidation process, the act repealed eight previous laws related to food safety in specific sectors.

The Food Safety and Standards Act includes graded penalties for offences. Manufacturing, storing, or selling misbranded or substandard food is punished with a fine; more serious offences with imprisonment. For example, the penalty for manufacturing or selling substandard food can be up to US\$2000, while that for misbranded food is up to US\$3000. The act also provides for compensation if consumer injury or death occurs. Street food vendors and hawkers can be fined up to US\$2000. While such fines are debilitating for the unorganized sector and SMEs, they might not be an effective deterrent for large companies.

Food hawkers in India are generally unaware of food regulations and have no training in food handling. They also lack support services such as good-quality water supply and waste disposal systems, which hamper their ability to provide safe food. Although standards were specified for water used as an input in the processing/preparation of food, the Food Safety and Standards Act does not specify standards for potable water, which is usually provided by local authorities. Thus, it puts the responsibility for ensuring that clean water is used on food providers, even when tapwater does not meet the required safety standards. This is a tall order for small food enterprises and street food vendors. Costs also rise if each vendor or processor invests in water purification systems. If such facilities were provided to food vendors, as in Malaysia and Singapore, India might be more successful in ensuring that this sector maintained acceptable standards of hygiene and cleanliness.

Despite some reservations about aspects of the Food Safety and Standards Act pertaining to the management of pesticide residues, traceability, testing facilities, penalties, consumer and business safeguards, and labeling, it was a welcome, long-overdue step in the context of improving the food safety scenario in India. Once the FSSAI has all of its technical and administrative infrastructure in place, tangible improvements in food safety can be expected.

In 2006, the Department of Animal Husbandry and Dairying Ministry of Agriculture also took a major initiative to improve the food safety and hygiene situation in the Indian dairy sector. India is the world's largest producer of milk,

with around 800 dairy plants operating nationwide. It is now mandatory for all dairy plants with the capacity to handle liquid milk of 10,000 liters of liquid milk or more per day or to produce 500 metric tons of dairy products annually to undergo an annual audit/inspection. The NPC and Export Inspection Agency conduct those audits/inspections and submit reports to the regulatory authorities. Dairy plants are required to carry out the corrections/improvements suggested by the audit/inspection teams within a specified time frame. Recently, this function has been brought under the jurisdiction of the FSSAI.

The three years of NPC involvement with the dairy sector brought several interesting facts into focus. Most dairy plants, small-scale ones, feel that modern food safety management systems are beyond them due to the lack of resources and access to knowledge. Large plants are concerned about returns on investment due to the lack of recognition of their quality and safety improvement efforts in the market. Another disturbing finding is the declining credibility of certification systems and agencies. Certification has become more of a commercial venture than an earnest professional endeavor to improve food safety and hygiene situation. Dairy plants with ISO9000, HACCP, and ISO22000 certification no longer command respect and thus premium prices among consumers. In some instances, milk products produced by the uncertified dairy plants enjoy more credibility and a larger market share. This trend was noticed by agencies like the Quality Council of India, and measures to make the process of accreditation and auditing more stringent and credible.

The most influential and widely quoted statement on consumer rights was from US President John F. Kennedy in 1968, who highlighted consumers' "right to safety, right to information, right to choose, and right to be heard." Consumer International defined eight basic consumer rights to: satisfaction of basic needs; information; choose; safety; representation; redress; consumer education; and a healthy environment. Thus consumers and consumers' rights organizations need to be in the forefront in exercising their right to food safety and involved in policy formulation. This is possible only when they are vocal, well organized, and present everywhere instead of only in large cities. The government must allow representation of consumer organizations in regulatory bodies and on consultative committees so that their views are heard and reflected in policies.

One of the most visible, effective consumer awareness measures initiated by the Indian government is the recent "Jago Grahak Jago (Wake up, consumer, wake up)" campaign in the mass media. It highlighted not only the rights consumers enjoy but also the redressal mechanisms available and therefore helped launch a type of nationwide consumer movement. This could serve as a guideline for similar campaigns, especially in the South Asian region where food safety scenarios are similar.

The real challenge lies in accepting and honoring the rights of consumers and educating them on those rights. Alert, organized consumers are essential for creating a food safety chain reaction and turning it into a mass movement. Isolated legislative efforts and exportcentric initiatives may succeed at best in creating some islands of excellence, leaving the majority of the population untouched.

