FOOD SAFETY STANDARDS IN RICH AND POOR COUNTRIES

INTRODUCTION

Increased food safety has long been associated with higher income. Consumers and governments can afford to focus more on reducing food-borne safety risks once basic quantity needs for foods have been met or are in the process of being met. This would suggest that policies focused on increasing income are the surest path to improving food safety in all countries, which they probably are. However, several questions arise regarding this simple proposition:

- In a world economy with increasing levels of trade in food, how does demand for food safety in rich countries affect the level of exports, income, and food safety in poor countries?
- Can food safety regulations be designed to meet the food safety demands of consumers in rich countries and, at the same time, further the interests of both consumers and producers in poor countries?

In recent years, several important analyses have been published on the impact of food safety and food safety standards on low-income countries (see, e.g., Unnevehr and Hirschhorn 1999; Henson et al. 2000b; Unnevehr 2003; Jaffee and Henson 2004). These conceptual and empirical studies yield insights into what is currently occurring internationally on the food safety front and also make recommendations regarding what should occur. Here we turn this body of evidence toward answering the question of whether globalization and economic policies can be guided by ethical considerations to achieve the World Food Summit Goal and the Millennium Development Goal on Hunger.

Several important ethical issues arise from the increasing demand for food safety and other quality attributes in rich countries, the disparity in domestic food standards between rich and poor countries, and the need for poor countries to generate income by exporting food products to rich countries (Unnevehr 2002). These issues revolve around:

1. The degree of obligation that rich countries and consumers have to consider poor countries when making food standards decisions
2. The responsibility of poor countries to consider and weigh the food safety and economic risks associated with food safety
3. The roles of governments and consumers in assuring an increase in the health of poor citizens around the world through improvements in the safety of the foods they eat.
We begin by briefly looking at the development of food safety concerns and food standards, and then turn to the issue of international regulation. Thereafter, we look at the effects on exports from poor countries and on their food standards. Finally, before we conclude, we look at potential solutions in terms of harmonization, changes in domestic policy approaches, and capacity-building efforts.

The Importance of Food Safety

The production of safe food is important because of the public health burden that results from the consumption of unsafe foods. Reliable worldwide data on the incidence of food-borne illness, and the total impact generated, are not available. However, the World Health Organization (WHO) believes the health burden from poor food safety is very significant and is placing an emphasis on reducing this burden (WHO 2002a, 2002b). Better, but by no means perfect, data are available in more developed countries. For example, in the USA, the latest estimate is that food-borne diseases annually cause approximately 76 million illnesses, 325,000 hospitalizations, and 5,000 deaths (Mead et al. 1999). Of these, known pathogens account for an estimated 14 million illnesses, 60,000 hospitalizations, and 1,800 deaths.

In terms of risk ranking, this burden is smaller than for other health risks, but these numbers suggest a significant public health and economic burden from food-borne illness. Moreover, food safety is generally underprovided in markets relative to what is a social optimum, because of market failures. For example, consumers and governments may under demand food safety because of a lack on information about the incidence and impacts of food-borne illness. For the same reason, consumers may not seek out and reward producers with better safety records.

Although food safety is not at the top of a risk ranking for public health, the demand for food safety has nonetheless been rising, largely due to increasing incomes and access to more information (Krissoff et al. 2002; Buzby 2003; Caswell 2006). Overall demand for food is income-inelastic: Food consumption rises more slowly than income does. However, as incomes rise, consumers demand products of higher quality, including more safety and freshness, as well as better tracking of attributes such as production and marketing practices (e.g., organic, fair trade). At the same time, food safety crises, such as BSE in the EU and outbreaks associated with E. coli O157:H7 in the USA, raise the demand for increased government regulation of food safety.

Both of the demand factors (higher income and better information) are weak in poor countries, especially among the poorest segments of society. As a result, governments, companies, producers, and consumers have probably very significantly underinvested in the provision of food safety in poor countries relative to the public health burden it poses.

Improving food safety in poor countries increases the welfare of citizens in two ways. First there is the direct effect of better health and the increased productivity associated with a higher level of safety for domestically consumed products. Second,