

The Raghavan Report

Safe and quality food: A shared responsibility – A need for training and capacity building

by Raghavan ('Ragha') Sampathkumar



Continuing from my last column, there are several areas where food chain stakeholders must join hands and invest to ensure food that reaches the consumer is safe and is of good quality at affordable prices.

When looking at the Asian region, there are at least 600 million farmers and the majority are smallholders. In most countries, these smallholders neither have the knowledge and financial capacity individually to access domestic or export markets nor have any formalised institutional system to support them in terms of

providing knowledge on best practices, technological know-how and most importantly, finance. These farmers are staring blankly at the fast growing food industry in Asia that is struggling to source good quality raw materials and agricultural produce. This situation is common across all commodities and needs concerted efforts by all stakeholders, this is essential to benefit both ends of the food chain – farmers and consumers.

Some of the most critical aspects that require immediate attention are: safety (e.g. free from contamination); residue-free (e.g. chemicals, heavy metals etc.); and improved shelf life particularly for perishables. At one point of time, secondary standards were absolutely necessary to gain consumers' confidence and as a result, premium prices.

But with mushrooming of several such standards since the last decade, consumers are increasingly becoming confused. Regulatory agencies worldwide are becoming more cognizant of these kinds of multiple third-party certifications and sooner or later, these certifications and labels may also get scrutinised strictly.

At least a few major food industry players have already started their own means of assuring their customers and consumers of their good quality and compliance to sustainability commitments instead of the third-party certifications. It must be noted that such an effort strongly turns the emphasis onto improving their supply chain, which may even surpass the third-party standards. However, this is only a beginning of yet another phenomenon to win consumers' trust. Whatever may be the means to reassure the consumer of quality, it is important to build capacity within their respective supply chains and those efforts must reach to the last mile. Farmers must be at the core of these efforts wherein several companies can join hands on what is termed as "Pre-competitive partnerships". Farmers must be trained on responsible use of inputs. For example, training on responsible use of chemicals for agriculturists and judicious use of antibiotics for the livestock farmers are absolutely critical to ensure sustainable production of quality and safe food.

With economic progress, consumers' preferences are evolving faster than the previous generations and they are becoming ever more demanding on issues such as animal welfare, environmental sustainability, human rights and resource efficiency. Their purchase decisions are increasingly getting influenced by the level of compliance to and/or exceeding the standards on these aspects.

Hence, sectors such as fresh produce and poultry in Europe and aquaculture and fisheries in South East Asia are already under the scanner for any non-compliance and aberrations on the above parameters. Several major players including Unilever and Cargill are moving in the direction of voluntarily improving their practices and ensuring these critical aspects are addressed.

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