



The Raghavan Report

Safe and quality food: a shared responsibility

by Raghavan ('Ragha') Sampathkumar



The World Food Day is celebrated every year on October 16, and unlike many other international days, it is always a special one to me as I see this as an opportunity to remind us several important things.

Firstly, contrary to the popular warnings and alarms, I am more optimistic about our ability to feed the growing population now and in future. However, quality and safety of food are as important as producing sufficient quantities of food.

This is what I call a shared responsibility and each entity in the food value chain has its role to play and responsibility to fulfil.

I recently trained a group of people from different countries in Asia and Africa that are working in the Ministry of Agriculture in their respective countries.

The programme aimed at providing them some basic concepts of IPM (Integrated Pest Management) and judicious use of agrochemicals.

From what I learnt while observing them and also listening to their viewpoints, overall focus on food safety (including chemical residues) must be improved particularly in the low-income countries of the developing world.

Food safety is also an important concern for the other countries that export their agricultural produce to different destinations such as the EU and the US, where food safety standards are rather stringent. For millions of farmers in Asia and Africa, who live on their subsistence farms and struggle to make their ends meet, compliance to the food safety and quality standards would be an enormous task.

However, their vicious cycle of poverty can be broken only with sustained efforts and support by all the food chain stakeholders. One of the ways private sector can participate is through exploring pre-competitive partnerships and by joining hands with several civil society organisations for conducting trainings for the farmers on food safety and quality standards and better cultivation methods such as GAP. Governments can contribute to these efforts by ensuring the agricultural extension personnel are trained and capable of further cascading the learning to the farmers. Civil society organisations and agricultural universities can play a greater role by providing common platforms where all the stakeholders discuss, interact and learn from each other's successes and failures.

Thus, ensuring food that reaches the consumers is safe, nutritious and is of good quality is a shared responsibility of all the food value chain stakeholders.

One of the major lacunae in most countries of the developing world is that the agricultural education and curriculum is not updated and is far off from the ground realities of today. Because of this, the graduates are not industry-ready despite having the educational qualification. Hence, it is an important area for the governments to look into and do what is necessary to help young students get the necessary skills and knowledge to get employed in the fast growing food industry. And there are more key areas like this where action from all stakeholders are required.

I will be discussing those key areas in the subsequent columns.

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