Global harmonisation of food safety regulations

Putting science first

BY LUCIEN JOPPEN*

Food safety has evolved from a non-competitive to a competitive issue. All too often, countries use food safety as a protectionist tool, with science as a 'dependable' sidekick. The Global Harmonisation Initiative (GHI), set up by IFT and EFFoST, wants to provide a science-based consensus which would lay the basis for a global approach to food safety.

Photography: ANP

Bans on food products have often turned into political disputes. In 2002, France refused to lift its ban on British beef, even when scientists deemed the product was safe. Putting a scientific consensus first could prevent such incidents. Until that time, one can expect angry farmers to rally in the streets.

"Too often science is used as an excuse to pander to domestic producers looking for means to restrict imports," explains John Reddington, vice president international trade with the American Meat Institute (AMI).

"The science on allowing the trade of meat and poultry during periods in which a country has BSE or low-path avian influenza, is fairly well understood, and makes it possible to avoid human or animal health hazards. The World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) has adopted guidelines to allow the trade of these meat and poultry products from countries that have had cases of mad cow disease and avian flu, so long as certain conditions are met. The problem to date is that many countries still do not accept these standards for imports, even though they agreed to accept the standards in a vote taken at the OIE."

Barriers to free trade

GHI intends to prevent cases such as the above. GHI co-chair Huub Lelieveld, retired senior technologist at Unilever: "We know there exist undue barriers to free trade that masquerade as food safety protections, and these must be eliminated. This situation can exist as a result of differences in food safety regulations and related legislative measures between nations. Hardly anyone is to blame, as food regulations have a very long history of having been drawn up in response to food safety incidents."

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The objective of GHI is to discuss, on a global level, the scientific issues that buttress the decisions made by individual governments and international regulatory bodies in order to achieve global consensus on the science of food regulations and legislation to ensure the global availability of safe and wholesome food products for all consumers.

Lelieveld: "We will collect and evaluate the available evidence and circulate the findings among food scientists from all over the world, for debate and comments, eventually reaching a consensus statement," Lelieveld says. "The group intends to obtain consensus on the science that is or should be used by regulators, making it easier to agree on harmonised requirements."

Waste of resources

GHI should build its authority on its impartiality and the quality of its discussion groups. "We do not accept sponsoring from companies but rely on subsidies (e.g., from the EU) or donations from non-profit organisations such as EFFoST," Lelieveld says.

As GHI operates in the same force field as EFSA, ILSI, FDA and other food safety/risk assessment organisations, its discussion groups are most likely to have representatives of these institutions.

According to Lelieveld, GHI caters to the need for a global, science-based risk assessment body. "The Codex Alimentarius provides a baseline for international harmonisation. However, it is an intergovernmental organisation, and consequently its participants represent governments. EFSA, on the other hand, is purely science-based, but the organisation only covers Europe. EFSA does not consult other geographical areas either, nor does it necessarily seek consensus."

Lelieveld says it is a waste of time and resources to require approval in several countries, each demanding similar data produced by different research protocols or methodologies. "What is needed are globally agreed protocols and a system to ensure that those protocols are followed accurately. Once checked and perhaps double-checked, the results should apply universally."

More common sense

It remains to be seen whether GHI will have the leverage to convince regulators to comply with documents which are based on an universal scientific consensus. As political agendas often influence legislation or trade embargos – see BSE or GMOs –, politicians are always able to find a scientist who contradicts a communis opinio doctorum. Moreover, national institutions in the field of food safety may be concerned about their jobs and are most likely to defend their turf.

Lelieveld denies that GHI would make it harder for 'dissenters' – scientists who oppose a consensus statement –, as GHI publications would be the result of an elaborate process. The first GHI documents can be expected two years from now.

Ultimately, more common sense has to be adopted in the scientific process that backs up legislation. Currently, money and time are being wasted because of long and difficult application procedures and research institutes investigating the same phenomena but only with a different methodology.

In theory, this sounds perfectly all right. In practice, however, gaining consensus about a certain methodology may be very difficult to obtain. According to Lelieveld, this does not have to be a problem. "If there is no hard evidence, more research needs to be done to support either theory."

Novel foods

In the long run, Lelieveld foresees problems with the availability of safe and healthy food if there is no consensus. "At the moment, the private sector is hesitant to invest in new technologies to produce safe and healthy food, as there are many uncertainties regarding the 'global reach' of these initiatives. Novel food processing methods, for example, HPP and PEF, are not yet regulated in Europe, although these technologies are deemed safe for a number of products in Japan and the US. The effect of HPP and PEF on the nutritional value of, say, apple juice is less detrimental than of severe heat treatment. This means that the availability of healthier versions of existing products is being restricted. Furthermore, the competitiveness of the food industry is being hindered, as the return-on-investment of new technologies is very difficult to assess."

The consumer's demand for healthy food and the growing overall demand for food (because of a dramatic increase in the world population over the next 10 to 20 years) spells good news for the food and drinks sector. It means that on a global scale, growth in both value and volume is possible, provided unnecessary trade barriers are eradicated. ■

Food contact equipment

Different food safety regulations within the EU have implications down to the production floor. In the case of food contact materials, most countries have chosen to 'do their own thing'. Lelieveld: "Some use positive lists, others use negative lists. As a result, the industry and supply base do not know where they stand. Many regulations forbid the presence of potentially toxic elements in food contact materials (zero tolerance). Whether a substance is toxic, however, depends on the concentration. Iron is an essential nutrient, but in too high a concentration can be deadly. The same applies to several other metals, such as molybdenum, nickel and silver that are common in food production equipment. However, this does not have to pose a problem to public health, as these potentially toxic elements are also present in foodstuffs. All depends on the relative amount. GHI wants to tackle this by looking at the available research data and see whether a consensus can be reached."

* The above article is based on 'Industry waits for green light on harmonized food safety standards', written by Sarah Fister Gale for Food Safety Magazine (www.foodsafetymagazine.com)