

# Food Safety Issues From The Asian Consumer Viewpoint

**Ms Hatijah Hashim**  
*Research Officer*  
*Consumers Association of Penang*

## **Introduction**

Consumers have a right to adequate and suitable food to meet their nutritional needs. They also have the right to expect that such food is safe to consume. Despite this right, reinforced a decade ago by the FAO/WHO International Conference on Nutrition in 1992, a different reality remains.

Million of consumers suffer and/die each year from diarrhoea and other food borne and water borne illnesses. In the Asia Pacific region, more than 700,000 people die from cases of food and waterborne disease caused by microorganisms. The WHO estimates that almost 2 million children in developing countries die each year from diarrhoea caused mainly from food-borne disease. In addition to diarrhoea unsafe foods also cause a number of other types of serious disease, including debilitating long-term effects of certain chemicals naturally occurring or added to foods through agricultural production systems.

Even though some of the recent public health emergencies in Asia such as avian flu, Nipah virus and SARS are clearly not food-borne diseases, they are in some way related to either the way food is produced or how food animals are handled.

The cost of food-borne disease and food contamination is great. They include personal suffering, loss of family income, increased community health care costs and loss of trade revenue and industrial productivity. In financial terms, the cost is estimated to be many billions of dollars annually.

## **Food safety scenario in Asia**

### *Small scale and cottage industry*

In most Asian countries as the demand for food production and processing increases, small-scale food producers and cottage industries usually outnumber large-scale commercial producers and processors. These small-scale producers often lack adequate facilities and knowledge to produce foods that are safe and have acceptable quality. Traditional practices passed down through generations are often the only guidelines for

food preparation. In many Asian countries, for example dangerous chemicals such as boric acid are used in noodle preparation. As can be expected, the major driving forces for these industries are consumer demands and profit.

### ***Street food***

“Street-vended foods” or “street foods” are defined as ready to eat foods and beverages prepared and/ or sold by vendors in streets and other similar public places for immediate consumption or consumption at a later time without further processing or preparation.

In Asian cities, street food vendors play the critical function of preserving local and traditional cuisine. Some traditional snacks or food are only preserved through their ability to appeal to consumers as sold on the street. Consumers generally welcome street food vendors as a source of easily accessible, relatively safe, affordable and nutritious food. However street foods are perceived to be a major public health risk in view of health problems associated with food hygiene and sanitation that are closely related to improper personal hygiene, unsanitary handling practices and habits.

### ***Processed food***

As consumption habits and food purchasing behaviour are modified, consumers in urban areas have less time for preparing food. Therefore the demand for more convenience and processed meals increases.

Wholesomeness, tastiness and value for money are the basic qualities that consumers look for in food products. There are also other concerns. Consumers suffering from diabetes, kidney disease, heart disease and allergies are extra careful in their intake of food. Thus, labelling information should take into regard the needs of consumers.

While labelling information is an important criterion for processed food in some affluent countries the situation in Asia is different. Besides the issue of labelling, food quality and safety issues in terms of utilization of adequate inputs particularly safe water and the use of dangerous and excessive food additives in food processing are of prime concern as this could lead to food poisoning.

### ***Technological advances in food production***

Consumer groups are concerned and disturbed about technological advances in food production in which the products seem artificial. They are generally opposed to the introduction and proliferation of new and more complex products, sophisticated marketing techniques and increasing technological complexity.

Irradiation technology for food preservation and the use of microwave ovens, though scientifically proven safe are still not fully acceptable to many consumers. In addition the use of biotechnology or genetically engineered products is high on the list of consumer worries.

### ***Influence of advertising***

The use of advertising to influence consumer preference is becoming popular as an effective approach to product marketing. It is a very powerful tool in shaping the perception and behaviour of consumers towards a specific product. Although it can be argued that advertisements are advantageous to consumers, in many instances the message transmitted in commercial food advertisements have been unacceptable, confusing and even untruthful.

### ***Other concerns***

The use of pesticides in agriculture and the detection of pesticides residues in food frequently attract the attention of consumers in their quest for a chemical free environment and safe food to eat. Other concerns include the fear of possible migration of chemical leachates from food packages, stimulated by isolated research findings on the subject.

### **Major consumer concerns about food quality and safety**

- **Standards:** Consumers feel that they do not always get fair value for their money. They are discontent with food that spoils or fails to meet expectations in taste, aroma and palatability.
- **Nutritional quality:** In many developing countries, adulteration deprives consumers of nutritional value. In developed countries, consumers are dissatisfied with inadequate nutrient information on labels.
- **Food control system:** while the consumers are aware that food control regulations exist, they are not convinced that they are applied effectively. Some food producers and distributors feel that they can ignore the law with impunity.
- **Information:** Consumers believe that the government and industry do not provide enough information to enable them to make an informed choice. Very often, labels of food do not carry adequate, easy –to –read information. Information from government industry and other sources is often not clear or may be conflicting.
- **Environmental contamination:** Consumers' concern has grown rapidly over possible environmental contamination of the food supply during various stages of production, harvesting, processing, storage and distribution. They lack confidence in the ability of food control services to provide the necessary protection.
- **Irradiation and biotechnology:** Consumers feel that some processes using new technology are unsafe because they have not been adequately evaluated. Reliable information about newer technologies is not always available.

The list has been further extended to cover genetically modified organisms, allergens, veterinary drugs residues and growth promoting hormones used in the production of animal products.

Consumers expect protection from hazards occurring along the entire food chain from primary producer through consumer (often described as the **farm-to-table** continuum). Protection will only occur if all sectors in the chain operate in an integrated way, and food control systems address all stages of this chain.

## **Dilemma of consumers in addressing food safety issues**

### *Acceptable and appropriate solutions*

Most decisions regarding food safety need to balance costs with benefits, and this always involves value judgements. For example food additives or pesticide residues: How safe is safe? An amount that one person may consider to be acceptable may be thought much too risky by another. The perception of risk does not always fit the statistical evidence. For example many consumers are more worried about pesticide residues in food than about microbes. Yet microbes in food according to scientific data available, actually cause more sickness and deaths than pesticides in food

In the end who decides what is an acceptable risk for society? All sectors of society must be involved in the decision making process. This will help everyone to understand better the compromises that are needed. For example a person who has been actively involved in the decision-making and whose concerns have been addressed during the process will have a stake in the results and will support them. The final decision will be acceptable to a wider range of society as it is more likely to match society's overall values.

Therefore participation of consumer's representatives at these decision-making processes can foster appropriate solutions. As all the stakeholders are involved each can contribute effectively to address all concerns. The simplest solution that truly addresses the problem, rather than the perception of the problem by a small group of people, can then be adopted. A wide range of participation also allows for an interdisciplinary approach to a problem. If used well this should result in a more comprehensive approach and prevent a situation in which a solution just creates another problem

### *Food control system*

Where food safety is concerned most countries share the objectives of protecting consumers from health hazards and commercial fraud. Achieving these objectives require a food control system based on a fundamental food law, accompanied by detailed regulations and administered by an efficient food control organization. Therefore when food legislation is enacted the importance of consumer participation must be recognized, as this will enhance consumer confidence in the national food control system.

However, in reality this may not be true. For example in Malaysia we have a good set of legislation geared towards promoting food safety in the country. Due to lack of adequate enforcement of the law has not been implemented resulting in the country experiencing numerous bouts of food safety problems. Furthermore there were many occasions when

consumer groups alerted the government on complaints of non-compliance to food standards and action was not taken resulting in consumers being exposed to the hazards for years.

### ***Barrier to consumer participation***

The structure for consumers to deal with food safety matters may be inadequate. For example if the structures and processes do not take into consideration the difference between consumers and resource rich industry and professional associations, it is difficult for consumers or those representing their interest to take part in the process adequately. Consumers and consumer's organisation usually have few resources and often lack the necessary specialised knowledge to comment on specific details being debated.

On the other hand government food control agencies tend to avoid consumer organisations, which they view as antagonistic and not representative of the true concerns of the individual consumer within the country. In the eyes of the of government officials the issues raised by consumer groups seems irrelevant and even when they are viewed as important there may not be enough resources to deal with the issues that were raised.

### **What consumer need?**

Therefore confidence in the safety and integrity of the food supply is an important requirement for consumers. Food borne disease outbreaks involving agents such as *Escheirchia coli*, *Salmonella* and chemical contaminants highlight problems with food safety and increase public anxiety that modern farming systems, food processing and marketing do not provide adequate safeguards for public health. Factors, which contribute to potential hazards in food, include improper agricultural practices; poor hygiene at all stages of the food chain; lack of preventive controls in food processing and preparation operations: misuse of chemicals, contaminated raw ingredients and water: inadequate or improper storage, etc.

### **Consumer participation is a need and a right**

As food is the basic need for all, consumers want enough food of good quality. It is only natural that they want to make sure that government and industries work in their best interest. Even if the government and industries have consumer protection as their goal, the consumer wants to have a role.

Most consumers acknowledge the right of citizens to be consulted on matters that affect them. The United Nation's Universal *Declaration of Human Rights* states in Article 21 that everyone has the right to take part in the government of his or her country, directly or through freely chosen representatives. Democracy is much more than periodic elections, it is active participation.

The United Nations 'Guidelines for consumer protection reinforce the right to participate. In its general principles, the document states that consumer groups should be free to form. These groups should be given opportunities to present their views in the decision-making process

The World Commission on Environment and Development (1987) in its report *Our common future* concluded that sustainable development could only be achieved with a political system that allows effective participation in decision making.

## **Role of Consumer Organisations**

Given the complexity of modern society and the specialization that has occurred, consumer organisation are an effective means of integrating the consumer interest in food control. They provide a nucleus of people with ties to the community who can develop the expertise for more effective participation. At the local and national levels, these groups can educate consumers, investigate problems, monitor compliance to standards and advocate change on behalf of citizen.

The Consumers Association of Penang (CAP) is an organisation orientated towards consumer well being and social reform. We see our role as bringing up important development issues and generating public consciousness on issues pertaining to health, for example food safety.

The CAP model when developed in the 1970's and 1980's pioneered a new approach of consumer activities that were adapted to the needs of people and communities in developing countries.

The consumer movement had originated in the Western countries where "VALUE FOR MONEY" had been their slogan and testing of products (to determine the relative performance of various brands) had been a major objective.

CAP coined the slogan "VALUE FOR PEOPLE" to symbolise that in the Third World context, the consumer movement should be orientated towards meeting the needs and articulating the rights of ordinary consumers such as rights to food, housing, employment, a clean environment, safety in products, good business practices and an efficient bureaucracy.

### ***Food and products testing***

Over the years CAP has been conducting research on the harmful effects of the food and products in the market.

Our testing activities are focused on determining the safety, cleanliness, purity and quality of these commodities

Our findings in the past have revealed dangerous levels of dyes, heavy metals and additives in popular foodstuff and drink, fresh fish and seafood containing commonly prescribed antibiotics residues.

These findings are widely published in the media and are followed up with the respective government agencies in relation to the non-enforcement of laws or lack of laws in protecting consumer interest.

### ***CAP'S Healthy lifestyle campaign***

As the saying goes Health is Wealth. But wealth does not mean health. This is because as consumers get affluent they have more money to spend on food and products, which can be harmful to health. Statistics have shown that the number of Malaysians affected by diseases such as diabetes and hypertension had increased over the years. We realised that many of the health problems affecting the Malaysian consumers can be prevented if they practiced good nutritional habits.

Since 1973 CAP has conducted several healthy lifestyle campaigns.

- 1973 Anti Smoking
- 1975 Breastfeeding
- 1986, 1998 Sugar the Sweet Killer
- 1988 Anti alcohol
- 1999 Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals
- 2000 Cancer
- 2002 Salt the hidden killer in food.

### **Food safety concerns in Asia**

A number of factors contribute to food safety concerns in Asia including inadequate access to clean water, the increased use of pesticides and other chemicals in agriculture and food processing, and the lack of producer and consumer education. The rapid urban population growth in many countries means that many people live in conditions of extreme poverty, filth, and overcrowding and poor sanitation. This has also aggravated food safety problems.

Street food vendors and food service premises are an essential and an increasingly important part of the food supply system in nearly all of these countries. In the absence of strict controls over preparation, storage, distribution and display practices, those foods have the potential to become a major source of food borne disease. There are many countries in Asia which lack critical enforcement of health and food safety regulations against street food vendors which is always blamed on the shortage of health inspectors.

In some countries laboratories with capacity to detect common food borne hazards are rare and where they exist, the high cost of testing is an obstacle.

In countries that have a regulatory framework for monitoring food control, enforcement is often weak, owing to inadequate infrastructure.

It has also been recognised that Asia has now become a major exporter of a large range of food products such as rice, poultry and fish to all over the world. As such the exporting countries in Asia of these commodities will have to adhere to the increasing stringent food safety standards of its trading partners in addition to ensuring safe food for its own consumers.

## **Co-operation between Asia and Europe on Food safety issues**

At the Regional Conference on Food Safety for Asia and the Pacific organised by FAO/WHO in 2004, it was realised that massive effort is needed to improve food safety in the region. Therefore it is timely that Europe could consider giving assistance to its Asian partners based on the recommendations of the conference.

Among the assistance that Europeans could give to its Asian counterparts are as follows:

- Mobilise resources, skills and know-how to respond to the burden of illnesses caused by the consumption of unsafe food. Provide aid to the governments concerned so as to ensure that producers, processors and consumers alike practice good practices including in-plant and animal production, to minimise the risk of contamination.
- Establish or strengthen national food-borne disease surveillance programmes in each country and facilitate timely inter-country exchange of relevant information as an initial step towards the creation of regional networks
- Assist in adopting a well-coordinated multi-sectorial approach to food safety risk analysis, assessment, management and communication.
- Assist in creating awareness of food safety risks and opportunities to prevent or mitigate food safety hazards throughout societies from producers to consumers.
- Set up the “*Rapid Alert System*” among Asian countries similar to the one that has been done among countries in the European Union.

## **Conclusion**

Food safety is increasingly becoming a global challenge both by virtue of its public health impact as well as its economic and political implications. Therefore it should be addressed throughout the food chain from farm to table, that is from stage of production, processing storage and distribution. As such it requires close collaboration and cooperation among all stakeholders along the food chain, clearly defined jurisdiction and responsibilities, mechanism of cooperation and means of dealing with existing and emerging food challenges. Resources such as manpower and finance should be allocated and utilized in a coordinated manner to achieve optimal results.

Particularly in Asia where in some countries, due to lack of funds and facilities available it is not possible to improve on the food safety situation in the country. Therefore it is crucial that aid in the form of funds and expertise be given to the countries concerned so that the incidences of food related diseases can be reduced, if not eradicated.

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