

Food security: Management briefing: Safe, secure supply

Just - Food

August 2007

Copyright 2007 ProQuest Information and Learning Company
All Rights Reserved
ABI/INFORM
Copyright 2007 Aroq Limited

Section: Pg. 9

Length: 3185 words

Byline: Hurst, Bernice

Body

Within countries, food safety problems can provoke knee-jerk reactions and promises that will require rarely-obtainable additional resources and considerable time to put into effect. Meanwhile, security also has to cover the livelihood of those at the sharp end of production. Whether or not to subsidize farmers, and to what extent, in order to protect their income is an argument that has been raging for decades. Food and fuel security are inextricably linked in terms of both production and distribution. As the cost of oil and gas rise, so do production costs on farms and in factories along with the costs incurred by getting food from field to table. **Food security** is not all about farming and food we can grow. Subsistence, conservation, marine stewardship and the protection of endangered species influence livelihoods for groups all over the world.

FULL TEXT:

Playing the blame game

Pointing the finger at others can be seen as a route to absolution and inaction. European complaints about the US system of food aid divert attention from European farm subsidies; large manufacturers point to what they have done to take attention away from what they have not done; demanding guarantees from exporters means that importers have less responsibility (or can get away with making excuses); apologies and mea culpas are deemed to be sufficient.

Sanctions have traditionally been used to pressure governments by depriving people living in their countries of a safe and secure food **supply**. In 2006, South Korea stopped shipping food aid north because of objections to longrange missile tests and possible nuclear weapons tests. In 2007, just one day after North Korea promised to implement a nuclear disarmament agreement, South Korea promised to start shipping food again. US sanctions against the people of Cuba have continued for decades. Multiple examples of the ways in which **food insecurity** has been used to apply pressure could be cited in a longer document.

Within countries, food safety problems can provoke knee-jerk reactions and promises that will require rarely-obtainable additional resources and considerable time to put into effect.

US proposals to reorganise the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and US Department of Agriculture (USDA) have met, not surprisingly, with a mixed response. Would the new agency be too big, would it have enough money and staff, or is it just a way to be seen to be doing something which was not properly thought through or likely to be implemented?

Food security: Management briefing: Safe, secure supply

The US has been accused of not getting its own house in order with regard to inspections and preventing food scandals. The number of cattle tested for BSE is notoriously low, based on official insistence that the disease doesn't exist in the US; abattoirs and manufacturers are forbidden to do their own tests on the grounds that they might produce "false positive" results. Newly-appointed US food tsar David Acheson has even echoed a notorious pronouncement made several years ago by Tommy G Thompson, then Health and Human Services Secretary, implying that too much information might frighten consumers.

While only 1% of food imports to the US are allegedly inspected according to press reports in July 2007, additional pressure and responsibility are being placed on countries exporting to the US - China more than any other, because of recent scandals regarding pet food and toothpaste that were believed to cause serious illness and death - and the huge quantities involved. More guarantees, including details of shipments as soon as they are dispatched, are demanded by way of justification. As pressure has been put on the FDA, the body responsible for regulating and inspecting food, an ethos of taking and sharing responsibility may be developing. In mid-July 2007, US President George W Bush appointed a Cabinet-level Import Safety Working Group to police the safety of imports, including food and ingredients.

During the annual CIES conference, Jeffrey Ettinger of Hormel Foods Corporation was just one who pointed out that all countries have their problems. "It is inappropriate to single out China as we all have instances related to food safety issues in our backyards," he said. To demonstrate agreement with this principle, China has recently rejected several consignments of food imported from the US, claiming that they did not meet China's high standards. To prove its point, the Chinese government has also closed down thousands of its own food plants for not being good enough.

Rich producers, poor producers

Meanwhile, security also has to cover the livelihood of those at the sharp end of production. Whether or not to subsidise farmers, and to what extent, in order to protect their income is an argument that has been raging for decades. The European Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) was established when the European Economic Commission (EEC) was formed in 1957 with the best possible intentions. CAP was designed not only to protect farmers and encourage production but to guarantee the security of food supplies for survivors ravaged by the war and the shortages it imposed. US farmers have been subsidised for decades for similar reasons.

The continued existence of such subsidies today is the basis for disputes over the relative wisdom of aid versus trade. Poor farmers in developing countries are often without markets for what they produce because of imports from richer countries. Some of those imports are sold more cheaply than home-produced goods can ever be while some are given in the form of aid.

Either way, critics say that the rich are growing richer while the poor remain poor, arguing that the system is no longer relevant or necessary. Proponents respond that using surplus food to feed the poor is the best way to ensure that everyone's supply is secure.

On top of all that, as farms amalgamate and fewer small, family-run businesses remain, the bulk of the subsidies are said to be filling the coffers of large agribusiness, penalising small farmers even further. While this may still provide a secure supply of food, the balance has shifted in a way that many argue is unfair and unsustainable. The overall effect, according to a report in another UK newspaper, The Observer, quoting Paul Goodison of the European Research Office, is that "the latest round of reforms have helped EU food prices to adjust down to world levels so that they can be exported successfully but have a devastating impact on developing countries".

Food or fuel?

Food costs are expected to increase in future as energy initiatives aimed at combating climate change cause more land to be used to grow crops for biofuel. Shortages and high prices leading to debates over whether corn, wheat and sugar cane should be used for food or fuel will result in competition for acreage, according to Kona Haque, senior commodities editor at the Economist Intelligence Unit.

Food security: Management briefing: Safe, secure supply

Food and fuel security are inextricably linked in terms of both production and distribution. As the cost of oil and gas rise, so do production costs on farms and in factories along with the costs incurred by getting food from field to table. Prices rising at the same time as incomes falling would exacerbate **food insecurity** for all but the richest and most powerful. Whether or not this will happen is still uncertain, as many views, including those expressed in a European Commission report in July 2007, doubt that increased production of biofuels will, in fact, lead to higher prices.

In Mexico, the rush to grow corn for the production of ethanol has led to such high prices and shortages of the country's staple food that riots have resulted. President Felipe Calderón eventually capped prices but made it "voluntary for business", according to Jerome Taylor in the UK newspaper, The Independent.

Further south, in Guatemala, exports to US ethanol producers are reportedly fuelling soaring prices of corn and wheat, prompting the local food industry to ask the Government for help. The leading food industry federation, Gremial de Fabricantes de Productores Alimenticios (GREFAL), says that corn prices have soared by 75% in the last year, with the price of wheat jumping 43%.

Part of the problem in Brazil (and the solution, according to President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva) is sugar cane for fuel. Brazil has allegedly substituted sugar cane ethanol for fossil fuels for the past 30 years, which he claims puts it at the forefront of global change activists. But it has also brought criticism from Hugo Chavez of Venezuela and Cuba's Fidel Castro, who believe that growing biofuels is equivalent to taking food crops from the mouths of the poor and putting it in the petrol tanks of the wealthy. President Lula da Silva's response is that planting sugar cane "restores degraded pastures elsewhere in the country that are then returned to food production". Creating jobs and increasing incomes will enable poor people to purchase food from the more than ample global stocks that exist, he argues.

One last influencing factor is that a lack of fuel can mean doing without the wherewithal to cook any food that people may be able to lay their hands on. In some parts of Africa, for example, so much hardwood has been cut for fuel that the land has dried out, making drought conditions worse so that rain cannot be absorbed but either runs away or accumulates to cause floods. The result of this, in turn, is that the land is less fertile and people have to move to somewhere new just to find enough tillable soil to grow anything. So the cycle goes.

Shifting populations

Food insecurity as a cause of immigration is not news. Just think back to the Irish potato famine. Land grabs in Zimbabwe and other African countries have resulted in prosperous farms becoming less so, bringing on consequences that were not necessarily intended.

A look at the United Nations website gives chapter and verse on all the peoples whose food **supply** comes under the heading of "insecure", as well as the efforts being made to improve their plights.

According to the UN refugee agency, the number of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) around the world has increased for the first time since 2002. The UNHCR report on 2006 global trends, published in June 2007, says that the almost 10m people under the agency's mandate represent a 14% increase on last year. Coming from countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, East Timor, Somalia, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Burundi and Sudan among others, the reasons are down to a combination of man-made and natural disaster. While many may not be directly caused by **food insecurity**, that is arguably the effect of all of them on both the countries from which they flee and those that take them in.

In general, the people that are most at risk have little or no responsibility for causing their predicaments, although they often have the responsibility of living (or dying) with them.

Rich consumers, poor consumers

As food retailers and manufacturers gravitate from almost saturated Western markets to newer, developing markets, they are being welcomed with open arms. People with more money than they have been used to, and

Food security: Management briefing: Safe, secure supply

more access to shops and brands, are delighted at some of the choices with which they are being presented. Security is not a general concern. All many see is that, at last, they can have (and afford) what people in richer countries have. They do not yet see the side-effects of those products - the obesity epidemics or illnesses linked to unbalanced diets, excessive amounts of processed food or insufficient amounts of the nutrients available in fresh food. Their food **supply** is more secure and questions are not yet being asked about the safety of that food or the diet on which they may be embarking.

The bigger picture

Security is affected, however, in poor countries. While some consumers are getting richer, others are getting poorer. Madeline Bunting wrote in The Guardian in June 2007 that: "In Africa, it's estimated that 232,000 square miles of cultivatable land will be ruined, and up to a third of Africa's population could face water shortages by 2020. Africa is the continent that will be hit first and hardest by climate change. "

Not long afterwards, Mark Honigsbaum, writing in The Guardian's sister paper, The Observer, explained the cause and effect of Africa's **food security** problems in simple terms: "Whatever the cause, it is a vicious cycle. The more trees are cut down (by loggers seeking hardwood, planters wanting to clear land for sugar cane, people simply needing firewood for their stoves and, not least, illegal seizures by farmers and cattle ranchers), the quicker soils erode and the faster streams and rivers dry up. The result is drought or, when the rains come, catastrophic floods, prompting refugees to flee to more fertile, food-secure areas where they pile further pressure on the land."

Distribution problems in Africa because of wars as well as government intervention and corruption affect the security of food **supply** as well as reduced security for life and limb. Nature and external influences also play a significant role, however.

At the end of June 2007, Reuters reported on a news conference in the Kenyan capital, Nairobi, where Kjell Magne Bondevik, the UN Special Humanitarian Envoy to the Horn of Africa, said: "The Horn is hit by some of the world's most severe food crises and they are coming faster and more [furiously] because of climate change, environmental degradation, political and armed conflicts and a host of other factors. "

China, whose **food security** issues have been so much in the news during Spring 2007, has to protect its exports and its own citizens, but is also preparing for an influx of foreign visitors during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. There have been new stories almost daily about efforts being made by the Chinese government to prevent problems and recall products that slip through the new nets.

Pakistan's **food security** is also under threat, according to journalist Sajid Aziz, writing for thenews.com.pk, because of the Government's apathy and attitude towards farmers. According to Aziz, more than enough wheat and rice are grown but shortages and high prices are prevalent due to ineptitude and a lack of regulation. His conclusion is that: "[the] government should properly maintain **food security** as without stabilising the food prices and **supplies** no government could be stabilised politically and administratively". Meanwhile, in India, Aziz claims that prices have remained stable for commodities in spite of low yields.

In Afghanistan, **food security** problems are largely attributable to the lengthy war whose end is not yet in sight. Relief operations are hampered, the UN News Service reports, because of losses from attacks and looting although Rick Corsino, the World Food Programme (WFP) country director, says that only a fraction of deliveries have been affected as transporters insist on "minimum security guarantees".

Similarly, **food insecurity** in Palestine is due to fighting and closed borders, particularly in Gaza. Matthias Burchard from the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, told a press **briefing** that unless one of the crossings used regularly re-opens, food will run out in early July 2007. Both aid and commercial stocks are at risk, the WFP reported. Only weeks later, on 27 July 2007, Liz Sime from CARE International told IRIN, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs: "There is no doubt, Gaza is becoming aid-dependent in light of the continued closure of all crossing points, except for basic food commodities and humanitarian aid. With the borders shut, raw materials cannot get in and finished goods cannot be exported. "

Hunting and fishing

Food security is not all about farming and food we can grow. Subsistence, conservation, marine stewardship and the protection of endangered species influence livelihoods for groups all over the world. Choices have to be made, all too often, between diverting water to provide irrigation and protecting imperilled fish species, as in Oregon, or imposing quotas, as the EU has on North Sea fish stocks.

Once a year, at least, the **food security** issues of small, isolated, communities hit the headlines. As the International Whaling Commission (IWC) convenes each year to consider quotas for indigenous groups in Russia, Alaska and Greenland, a case has to be made and weighed against the conservation of endangered species. It is not about commercial practices but subsistence. People in Chukotka, in the far east of Russia, have relied on fishing for thousands of years. Marine mammal hunters were most celebrated when they brought home a whale. Alaska Natives, living just across the Bering Sea, have hunted whales continuously since ancient times.

Logistical nightmares

Transport, distribution, storage and handling all have an impact - sometimes negative - on food quality, adding another layer of difficulty to ensuring **food security**. From consumers buying in supermarkets to the victims of disaster around the globe, the ways in which food is handled can cause as well as alleviate problems.

Among the challenges that need to be overcome for security:

- * time from field to plate;
- * infestations found in food transported and then stored before being distributed as aid (even to victims of Hurricane Katrina in the US);
- * the amount of handling (as in fruit or vegetables transported from where they are grown to plant where they are processed and packed to depot from which they are distributed to stores where consumers can finally pluck them from the shelf).

In the UK, organic carrots grown by both Prince Charles and the director of the Soil Association, Patrick Holden, have fallen foul of the latter system as highlighted in the UK press in June.

Secure nations, secure **supplies**

Cases of food tampering are, thankfully, few and far between, but in a world participating in a continuing war on terror, the fear that it could happen tomorrow is never far away.

Dependence on imports is likely to continue growing. Droughts, floods, famines and the inability to deal with the effects of climate change mean that some of the world's poorest countries will be among the first affected. Mass migration may mean a shifting balance in where food comes from and goes to. Already Australia has suffered from drought, parts of the US have had fruit crops frozen, and many African nations are dealing with famine. As people emigrate, they yearn for traditional food from their homes, increasing the rate and variety of products and ingredients that need to be imported to satisfy their demands.

Forecasts from the United Nations in June 2007 for global population growth from 6.7bn in July to 9.2bn in 2050 mean that more food has to be produced and transported. The implications of cost and the practicalities of logistics are growing exponentially. Getting food across borders or from depot to consumer can be fraught. Governments, soldiers, guerrillas and pirates may have widely-varying agendas but the universal effect of their activities often prevents food reaching those who need it.

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Document-Type: Feature

Publication-Type: Other (Periodical)

Journal Code: JSFD

Acc-No: 1329810261

Subject: **FOOD SECURITY** (91%); AGRICULTURAL COMMODITY REGULATION (90%); FOOD ASSISTANCE (90%); FOOD SAFETY (90%); PRODUCT SAFETY (90%); EXPORT TRADE (89%); FOOD INSPECTION (89%); FOOD SAFETY REGULATION (89%); IMPORT TRADE (89%); NEGATIVE PERSONAL NEWS (89%); AGREEMENTS (78%); AGRICULTURE DEPARTMENTS (78%); CONSUMERS (78%); FOOD EXPORTS & IMPORTS (78%); INSPECTIONS (78%); MANUFACTURING OUTPUT (78%); AGRICULTURAL SUBSIDIES (77%); EMBARGOES & SANCTIONS (75%); NUCLEAR WEAPONS (75%); US-CUBA DIPLOMATIC RELATIONSHIP (75%); ARMS CONTROL & DISARMAMENT (74%); WEAPONS RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT (74%); US PRESIDENTS (73%); BOVINE SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHY (70%); HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (70%); MILITARY WEAPONS (69%); MISSILE RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT (69%); SCANDALS (67%); DEATH & DYING (64%); 9180 International (%); 5140 Security **management** (%); Food safety (%); International (%); Security **management** (%)

Organization: FOOD & DRUG ADMINISTRATION (82%); US DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE (72%)

Industry: AGRICULTURAL COMMODITY REGULATION (90%); FOOD SAFETY (90%); PRODUCT SAFETY (90%); FOOD INSPECTION (89%); FOOD SAFETY REGULATION (89%); MANUFACTURING (89%); AGRICULTURE DEPARTMENTS (78%); ANIMAL FOODS (78%); FOOD EXPORTS & IMPORTS (78%); MANUFACTURING OUTPUT (78%); AGRICULTURAL SUBSIDIES (77%); NUCLEAR WEAPONS (75%); WEAPONS RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT (74%); PET FOODS (73%); BOVINE SPONGIFORM ENCEPHALOPATHY (70%); HEALTH DEPARTMENTS (70%); MILITARY WEAPONS (69%); MISSILE RESEARCH & DEVELOPMENT (69%)

Person: TOMMY THOMPSON (55%); GEORGE W BUSH (50%)

Geographic: UNITED STATES (96%); KOREA, REPUBLIC OF (92%); CHINA (79%); KOREA, DEMOCRATIC PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF (79%)

Load-Date: September 5, 2007