

## ***FOOD SAFETY, INTERNATIONAL TRADE, SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTION AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY***

or

### **HOW CAN CONSUMERS TRUST FOOD PRODUCERS AND THE GOVERNMENTS THAT REGULATE THEM?**

1. Over 200 participants representing politics, science, industry, distribution, trade, retail, consumers and some 20 journalists participated in an in-depth and worthy dialogue on Food Safety on 1 March 2008. Only weeks after poisonous Chinese dumplings hit Japanese front pages the United Nations University, The Tokyo Foundation and the PA International Foundation invited Japanese, EU, US and Chinese experts to discuss Food Safety and ways to prevent, to mitigate and to be more vigilant. One key conclusion worded by former Norwegian Minister of Health Dr Werner Christie seemed to draw unanimous support: *“Not a whole country, but individual perpetrators should be punished for manufacturing and distributing contaminated food products and ingredients. Obviously this requires changes and improvements in the current food manufacturing, distribution and trade system.”* Without such changes, consumer confidence cannot be repaired while spontaneous buyer’s boycotts continue. *Ms. Masae Wada of the Japanese Housewives Association pleaded for faster information on any contamination cases to the consumer; stronger border inspections; better checks of processed food; more attention and support for the production of indigenous natural food; and more information on labels leading to better choice for consumers.*

#### ***Food Safety: Japanese Government Action***

2. LDP Group Chairman in the Japanese Upper House and former Health Minister Hidehisa Otsuji announced *severe measures by the Japanese Government to protect consumer’s health: particularly more vigilance and more inspections at the borders.* He recognized vulnerabilities in Japan’s unrivaled food culture by the sheer dependence of up to 60% of foreign food and food ingredients. While China had the largest share in contaminated food shipments blocked at Japan’s borders, in relative terms it was in fact US food that appeared to be most regularly unsafe. Former Minister Otsuji’s words on *trust* created the basis for the conference’s *key emerging understanding: consumer’s trust* can only be won back through practical steps that ensure safety and quality – which implies, as one food distributor indicated, that safety should not be sacrificed for a little more profit.

#### ***Industry’s position on Food Safety***

3. Most seem to agree with Ajinomoto’s Takeshi Kimura and DSM’s Martijn Adorf that food can be safe, also from China – but only if existing and emerging laws and regulations materialize in *truly sustainable production methods and adequate safety checks throughout the entire manufacturing and distribution processes.* Even if all formally required specifications for food products have been met, cheap production methods may still lead to forms of contamination. Adequate food manufacturing and distribution processes require investment. Responsible industries, who know that a brand is built up over years, but can be destroyed by negative publicity in hours, are willing to invest. But are consumers ready to pay? A public opinion poll presented by Mrs Misako Yasui of The Tokyo Foundation appears affirmative.

#### ***Food safety: China and the world***

4. “China cannot do without the world and the world cannot do without China”, said Dr Christie. Against this background Chinese AQSIQ (Quality and Quarantine) Academy President Dr Qin Zhenkui provided a detailed overview of efforts by the Chinese Government to radically improve the conditions for food manufacturing in China. Rapporteur Roger Skinner (UK) of the SFDA/ADB/WHO report on Food Safety in China advised how close to ten different Ministries and ‘structures’ in China and series of separate and overlapping laws and regulations could be re-organised in a more effective approach. But Dr Qin referred to the 11<sup>th</sup> National Food Safety Five Year Plan specifying that 12 advanced tasks were already well underway. Today, he said, 107,000 Chinese food production companies have or are reaching the same standards as their western counterparts. But such efforts eyed particularly the food *export* sector. More fundamental issues regarding polluted water, air and soil and issues as pesticides and chemicals control remained hard to address by China’s developing economy.

#### ***Food safety and the Environment***

5. Mrs Wakako Hironaka, former Japanese Environment Minister and Member of the Japanese Upper House for the Democratic Party of Japan quoted Chinese Vice Prime Minister Wu Yi: the cleaning up of Chinese water, air and soil is a condition for healthy food and food ingredients. Indeed China has rapidly become the world’s manufacturing place. But this has caused imbalances both inside and outside China that require re-dressing. Farmers both in Japan and in China are losing out. Japanese farmers – also of organic food – struggle to compete with low cost/low quality imported products. Chinese farmers can hardly survive on a very low income that creates vulnerabilities in key important issues such as pesticides and fertilizer control, storage, co-mingling, transport, and distribution.

#### ***Food Safety and Asymmetrical International Trade***

6. Dr Obijiofor Aginam, Director of Studies at Tokyo’s UN University, referred to these phenomena in his address on ‘Food Safety and Asymmetrical Relations in the Contemporary Global Interdependence of Nations and Peoples’. He demonstrated increasing asymmetries both in the North/South and in the South/South trade relations. While the Doha Round focuses at Western access to Southern markets, issues between more powerful and more vulnerable Southern nations seem more obscured but equally relevant. They are the result of shifting balances in economic, manufacturing, purchasing and trading powers. At the one hand he argued that nations should never engage in ‘disguised’ trade restrictions; at the other hand nations are allowed to adopt or enforce measures required to protect human, animal or plant life or health. In an effort to both explain and resolve the more negative consequences of globalization he stated that “*Trade norms must link with, and mutually reinforce other norms that advance human dignity*”.
7. Dr Qin recognized the problems involved with the Herculean task to develop an immense nation with many internal differences and changing requirements demanded of it by its trading partners. New rules on the use of pesticides and antibiotics are not easy to implement, he said. Poor farmers appear to handle such potentially dangerous materials less effectively and less professionally. Lack of supervision (traceability and transparency) over the entire food chain causes such mingling that origins of either a product or a contamination source are hard to retrieve. According to Dr Qin the Chinese Government is addressing these problems as effectively as it can, and emphasized that Chinese food manufacturers essentially produce in ways commensurate to their buyer’s demands. This is a requirement to continue economic growth at a rate sufficient to raise its people out of poverty. Indeed Mr. Toyoshige Ido of the Japanese trading company MICREED Cooperation referred to continuous demands by (Japanese) companies to Chinese producers to focus on quantity and price rather than on quality, training and education. This led Mrs Hironaka to conclude that *particularly international cooperation in*

*these areas and in joint inspection and certification will improve the food production and trade situation. She also called for common international standards of food safety and quality with stronger enforcement measures to provide better guarantees to the consumers.*

***Food Safety, Sustainability and Social Responsibility***

8. Dutch Agriculture Expert Carla Boonstra reported on the European Union's comprehensive approach to food safety legislation: *from farm to fork*. Mirroring Dr Aginam's statements she indicated that the European Union Member States anticipated ever stronger international measures to guarantee sustainability and social responsibility in the production of food. To earn *trust* of the consumers she said this required a shared responsibility between Government, Industry and NGO's; Trust among Governments; Transparency; A basic willingness of consumers to pay for safe products; and a Partnership between developed and developing countries including exchanges, sharing of know-how and knowledge, and transfer of technology. "Transparency is an essential factor in the food dialogue", she said; "Fair trade including a level playing field for industries is based on transparency".

***Food Production in Japan***

9. Folk researcher Tomio Yuki addressed the current imbalance in Food Safety and Trade issues through a very humane eye: a 103 old woman in Okinawa recently told him that "*food is the medicine for life*". This truth seems forgotten in today's hectic society. Quite apart from questions on the quality of foreign (processed) food Mr Yuki feared that food production in Japan would come to a halt altogether. Alarming falling numbers of both farmers and fishermen would leave an already dependent Japan with *no choice*: "*In twenty years there are no fishermen left*", he said. This seemed to further open a strategic vulnerability in Japan that goes beyond the concern for safe foods.

***Trust: Practical Steps***

10. Consumers cannot truly check all relevant details of food production – wherever this occurs. They do not know the technicalities involved and source labeling seems – in view of the multitude of sources used to produce food – no practical answer either. Besides, as the participants seemed to agree, the consumer should be left with a choice; it should not be an authority that decided everything for them. So the roundtable conference produced one huge unanswered question:

**HOW CAN CONSUMERS TRUST FOOD PRODUCERS AND THE GOVERNMENTS THAT REGULATE THEM?**

The conference's organizers are planning to establish a working group to address this particularly important question. The working group will first re-visit the root causes of concerns over food safety. On that basis, a systemic approach will be developed that is to enable any consumer in any retail outlet to check the sourcing and manufacturing of food and food ingredients. At the same time, the consumer should be enabled to check sustainability and social responsibility factors in the manufacturing process. This allows consumers to support, if they wish, domestic producers; or to avoid certain aspects of manufacturing; or to choose for more safety for a somewhat higher price over a certain risk for a somewhat lower price. It also de-mines the nationality issue: it should not matter at all where something is produced, but how and with what *precautions*. In the words of former Environment Minister Wakako Hironaka in concluding the conference: "*It is essential, then, that we apply a precautionary approach to producers, regulatory bodies and consumers. We need to ensure maintaining a healthy society as one of our top priorities*".