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Food Safety and Development: How Effective Are Regulations?

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Abstract

Rising income levels, changing consumption patterns and food scares have induced the development of tightened food quality regulations not only in developed countries. In Viet Nam, the growing importance of trade in food and high incidences of food poisoning and environmental pollution have raised the attention of consumers, producers and politicians. Particularly vegetables contain a host of contaminants at levels well above maximum residue limits, including pesticides, nitrate and heavy metals. In response to this problem, the Vietnamese government has launched a ‘safe vegetables’ programme in 1995 that has segmented the vegetable market into ‘safe’ and ‘conventional’ products.

The objective of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of food safety regulations in Viet Nam. By analysing strengths and weaknesses at different levels of the supply chain, we develop recommendations on how to improve the Vietnamese food safety system. Major questions for each level of the ‘safe food’ and ‘conventional food’ supply chain include (a) whether and to which extent current regulations are an effective tool to achieve food safety (b) which role do supply and demand play in this process (c) how food safety regulations and control systems could be improved and targeted to enhance food safety.

Methodologically, we use a comparative supply chain approach. The empirical case studies focus on different cabbage supply chains in Viet Nam. The comparative nature of the approach allows for the identification of key characteristics and problems in supply-chains of ‘safe food’ and ‘conventional food’ products.

Preliminary results confirm consumers’ concern about food safety and willingness to pay price premiums for guaranteed food safety. Limiting factors do exist on the supply rather than on the demand side. The lack of producers’ knowledge on adequate production methods and the absence of an effective control system are major obstacles on the way to more food safety in Viet Nam. Further results should encourage a better training of farmers on integrated-pest-management practices and a grading-up of control systems. This would protect consumers from food safety threats and benefit producers by increasing consumers’ trust in their produce and thereby improving their long-term marketing prospects.

Keywords: Food legislation, food safety, supply chain, Viet Nam