'Food Safety' Used to Increase Corporate Control over Food and Agriculture

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> A new briefing by GRAIN examines how "food safety" is being used as a tool to increase corporate control over food and agriculture, and discusses what people can do and are doing about it. Below is a snapshot of what's inside. The full briefing is available here.

The steady stream of scandals, outbreaks of disease and regulatory crack-downs that is part and parcel of the industrial food system has made food safety a major global issue. Our growing reliance on corporate food and farming concentrates and amplifies risk in new and unprecedented ways, at scales never seen before, making intervention more necessary than ever to ensure that food does not make people sick. But behind all of the talk and action lies another agenda.

"Food safety" may sound like it is about protecting people's health or even the environment. The European Union boasts of a food safety system that runs "from farm to fork", a language meant to make consumers feel assured that someone is watching out for them. But what happens these days in the name of "food safety" is not so much about consumers or safety as it is about getting everyone who is involved in food production, preparation, and delivery to conform to a number of "standards" set by supermarkets and the food service industry that are first and foremost about ensuring their profits.

Governments may set the frame for food safety through a number of policies and administrative measures (inspection services, and so on), but the private sector draws up and implements the actual standards. This public–private division (and collusion) creates a host of problems, because we end up with a situation where:
• the industrial food sector is essentially regulating itself, which reinforces the case that food safety is not primarily about public health, especially when it manifests itself in terrible food poisoning outbreaks; and,
• governments end up working for the corporate sector, even though this is not their role, because the regulatory system is public while the standards are private.

Now, thanks to globalisation and the loosening of rules around trade and investment, this model of food safety is spreading-- subjecting farmers, fisherfolk, and food industry workers all over the world to its corporate dictates. If Indians want to sell fish or grapes to the European Union, they have to conform to EU regulations and the standards set by the supermarket chains that control the EU market. If Brazilians wants to sell poultry or soya to Saudi Arabia, the Gulf state's criteria will kick in. "Fine", you may think. "This is only about big industrial farm operations anyway." But the idea – and reality – is that countries adopt these standards and apply them to domestic markets as well, ultimately impacting on all farmers in any given country. They are not just for exporters.

Who sets those standards? And who benefits from them?

More food is traded across borders than ever before. The World Trade Organisation's agreement on agriculture started slashing farms tariffs and quotas almost 20 years ago. Since then, the battle line of food trade disputes has shifted to what are called "non-tariff" barriers, such as food safety standards. Today, if you want to protect your country's farmers from competition, you can't put a

sign at the border saying "We have enough melons, keep out!" But you can put up a sign saying "We only accept melons that are halal, 15-20 cm in diameter, rinsed with potable water and certified to have been grown on farms with their own toilet facilities." Great for Carrefour, whose specially contracted suppliers will produce those very melons. But what about small farmers who can't handle all these criteria and the costs of certification that come along with them? If they are shut out of the supermarkets, what other options do they have?

An increasing share of the food that people buy is delivered to them through the supply chains of transnational supermarkets and food service corporations. Globally, food retail turns over US$4 trillion in sales each year. Supermarkets accounted for over half (51%) of those sales in 2009, with the top 15 corporations realising 30% of them. Pooled together, the top ten food retailers (Walmart, Carrefour, Metro, Tesco, Schwarz, Kroger, Rewe, Costco, Aldi and Target) raked in $1.1 trillion in 2009, enough to make them the thirteenth-richest "country" in the world. These are the firms shaping today's food safety systems and they wield enormous power in deciding not only where food is produced and where it is sold, but exactly how it is produced and handled.

There are all manner of development funds, micro-credit, and government subsidy programmes designed to help small farmers comply with these corporate standards. Through such programmes, a small number do manage to find tenuous spots producing on contract for supermarkets like Tesco or food-service companies like McDonalds. But the reality is that most farmers are simply shut-out, since supermarkets prefer to work with larger suppliers and farms. The space for a small farmer growing cabbages in China or potatoes in Zambia to market his or her produce is thus quickly shrinking as supermarkets and food service companies expand and as alternative channels, like wet markets and street vendors, are closed down by governments bent on applying the corporate standards. Only the corporations win in this situation-- not food producers or workers and not consumers.

How do we get out of this mess?

The corporate hijack of the food supply is not going unchallenged. A growing counter-movement of people is showing how real food safety can come only from a different model of food and agriculture.

Small-scale farmers teach us that food safety is not achieved through "zero tolerance" for micro-ogranisms or the "extreme hygiene" approach espoused by big corporations (pasteurisation, irradiation, sterilisation, etc.). Destroying biodiversity, including microflora and fauna, creates instability, which manifests itself in disease. It is better to aim for balances or equilibria through diversity, as these are the real pillars of harmony and health. This requires knowhow and it relies on short distances between production and consumption, but both are hallmarks of the alternative kind of food systems that a lot of people yearn for.

We must vigorously defend small vendors and street foods, as they often get vilified and wiped out in the name of food safety. Farmers' markets, community-supported agriculture, small shops and street hawkers – these are or can be the backbones of local economies and of what many believe is healthier food. Support for such circuits is on the upswing, but they need a lot more investment and effort, including on the specifics of food safety per se. Similarly, campaigns to keep foreign supermarkets like Walmart away or to prevent other countries from imposing their food standards are extremely important.

At the end of the day, food safety is about who controls our food. Should that be the corporations, or should that be us?

Main points from the briefing:

1. While it sounds like it's about public health, it's really about corporate wealth. Successive scandals, outbreaks of disease and regulatory crack-downs have made "food safety" a huge global issue. On the surface, all of the action appears to be directed at ensuring proper hygiene so that people don't get sick from food. But the deeper reality is that food safety has become a crucial battleground over the future of food and agriculture and a device to extend corporate control.

2. Industrial agriculture is very much the problem. Food safety risks are amplified by industrial-scale food production, processing, and marketing. A small farm producing a tainted product (e.g. salmonella in eggs) will affect only a small number of people. A large farm doing the same will hurt a large number of people, often across borders. Many of the worst food safety problems are generated by bad practices associated with industrial agriculture – heavy use of chemical fertilisers and pesticides, use of antibiotics and other pharmaceutical compounds for non-therapeutic purposes, high stock densities that favour disease outbreak, abuse of animals to raise productivity and lower costs, and bad labour practices.

3. Governments frame the rules but industry sets the standards. Food safety policy is broadly overseen by public agencies. Governments set and oversee the laws. But the food industry – from input suppliers to retailers – defines the standards and implements them. This results in standards that are highly biased toward corporate needs, and voluntary (i.e. self-regulation). Control over standards puts corporations in the driver's seat and leaves governments having to account for or clean up the mess.

4. Corporations win, people lose. Corporate standards are primarily about maximising profits and organising markets, not about food safety. Of course, the food industry gains nothing by killing people or making them seriously ill, but with their dominance over markets and in the absence of regulatory regimes that hold them responsible, corporations can treat food safety incidents as a mere cost of doing business.

5. Trade agreements are the core mechanism to expand and enforce food safety standards across the globe today. The US and the EU aggressively use trade policy, especially bilateral free trade agreements, to push their standards and regulate market access in favour of their agribusiness firms. However, exporters are not the only ones affected. Countries that adopt these industry standards, especially in the global South, apply them to domestic markets as well. As small-scale food producers, processors and vendors cannot comply, they are shut out of markets and even criminalised for their traditional practices.

6. Standards are spreading everywhere. Corporations and governments are stretching the regulations around food safety to extend control over the food trade. Soon it will be impossible to sell a Thai chicken or a Brazilian beefsteak to the European Union if the animals were not reared and slaughtered according to European animal welfare considerations. Similarly, there is huge commercial interest now in defining and setting global rules for the halal food trade.

7. Real food safety comes from balances, not extremes. Small farmers and processors teach us that we can achieve food safety through biodiversity, knowledge and the stability that equilibria provide. As the French farmer Guy Basitanelli of La Confédération Paysanne puts it, “Managing microbial balances, and protecting and producing specific flora based on a respect for traditional and local practices, is what best guarantees safety.” By contrast, the corporate system's reliance on extreme hygiene through forced sterilisation and industrial technologies (like irradiation or nanotech) leads to instability.

8. People are doing a lot to undo this corporate hijack. There is a strong counter-movement working to weaken the grip of agribusiness over the dominant food system and to promote better approaches. "Food safety" or more broadly speaking "food quality" is at the centre of these battles, whether it is people and organisations resisting the entry/expansion of supermarkets and agribusiness corporations, patronising local foods and community markets, boycotting big chains and dubious products (from GMOs to US beef), supporting food industry workers in their struggles for fair wages, entitlements and collective rights, stopping so-called free trade deals, or reforming agricultural policies to support peasant agriculture. This movement is growing, but it needs more support to become the backbone of our food economies and to put "food safety" back in people's hands.

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