THE SIDE EFFECTS OF FREE TRADE

Unhealthy business

Globalisation has brought with it the threat of disease and food safety

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The benefits of trade liberalisation have been well detailed: Tariff concessions and greater exchange of goods and services, for instance. But even as countries seek free trade agreements, a recent meeting of regional health ministers has shown that not all is rosy when it comes to trade liberalisation.

A Singapore Ministry of Health spokesperson told Today: “There was consensus that globalisation and trade liberalisation had brought many benefits but also new challenges, including the threat of emerging infectious diseases and food (and product) safety in a globalised supply chain.”

Such risks, said the spokesperson, “were clearly apparent in the Sars crisis of 2003 and the recent melamine scare”.

While risks from the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Avian) as well as China, Japan and South Korea met last month during the Third Asean Plus Three Health Ministers meeting in Manila to address concerns over the “adverse impact” of trade liberalisation on health.

Highlighting food safety as one area for collaboration, the ministers “condemned strongly unscrupulous business practices and cover-up by any entity”.

They agreed that melamine, an industrial chemical that had been added to Chinese dairy products sparking a global scare, “should never be added deliberately to any food product”.

In an email to Today, the World Health Organization (WHO) said that trade liberalisation increases the opportunities for sourcing and moving products all over the world. As such, “food safety becomes more an issue that needs to be tackled at the international level”.

While food safety is high on the list of a few countries, such as North America and Japan, “it needs to be higher on the agenda of all countries,” said the WHO, or it will be “impossible or very difficult to bring changes across the different ministries with sometimes competing interests, priorities and agendas”.

DON’T BLOW FOOD SAFETY, MELAMINE OUT OF PROPORTION

But senior fellow Bill Durodie of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS) cautioned against paying too much attention to food safety.

“Government want to be seen to address public concerns. But this could make things worse because when governments divert a lot of their resources to discuss food safety, it can make people imagine that food safety is a big problem,” he said.

There are “on occasion” a few issues that may justify such fears, but “keep melamine in proportion,” said the co-ordinator for the Homeland Defence Research Programme.

Many will claim to be ill from the chemical, but “these things take on a dynamic when people think they have been exposed. They become truly ill through fear”.

More importantly, he said, “food scares have very little to do with food safety”. Constantly bombarded with warnings such as terrorism, avian flu and toxic food, people become more fearful, he explained.

So, is the spread of melamine-contaminated food products a sign of things to come with the liberalisation of trade? “It may point to some systemic problem within the entire Chinese food production and supply chain area,” said Dr Durodie. “But exposing the Chinese to the world market is probably the fastest way of addressing these issues.”

FREE TRADE BRINGS FASTER SOLUTIONS

With trade liberalisation, checks and balances can move more easily across borders, counteracting the presence of harmful practices.

“While problems can develop quite quickly, solutions also develop much faster,” he said.

A case in point: During the Sars period in 2003, scientists in South-east Asia worked all day and passed the information on to teams in Europe at night, who then handed it to their American counterparts.

Associate Research Fellow at RSIS Ng Sue Chia added that trade liberalisation allows opportunities to monitor the regional food supply chain “from a more holistic ‘farm-to-fork’ and ‘whole-of-economies’ perspective”.

Meanwhile, the WHO advised governments to “be aware of the possibility of importing products with hazards not usually found (in them)”.

Governments should gather as much information on product origins and ingredients, to help them decide if additional testing is needed.

And since the authorities “cannot and should not test for everything,” said the WHO, the industry must be made responsible and “adopt a culture of safety first before profit”.

In a joint statement, the regional health ministers have asked their senior officials to gather information on the possible implications of international and regional trade and trade agreements for health and health policies.

SINGAPORE ROUNDUP

DESIGN CONGRESS TO BE HOSTED HERE

Singapore will play host to a global body of industrial designers when the 26th Icsid World Design Congress is held here from Nov 23 to 27 next year.

Held in conjunction with the biennial Singapore Design Festival, the congress which is also held every two years, will focus on current design trends and directions for the future.

Next year’s event, with the theme Design Difference, will be the last for the body — which represents an estimated 150,000 designers from over 50 countries — before its transition into the International Design Alliance.

Concurrently, Singapore will also host the IFI World Design Congress from Nov 24 to 27, 2009.

Details

The various fields pursued include law, life sciences and specialised medical courses.

Applicants must be Singapore citizens, have outstanding academic records, be active in social or community service or sports.

While there is no bond associated with the community.

Applications for the Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship are expected to actively contribute towards the betterment of Singapore and the community.

Those interested can download the application form at www.psc.gov.sg.

DOING ITS PART FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

It took 15 weeks, but now more than 30,000 primary school students from 39 schools have gotten the message about the importance of environment and eye care.

That was the theme of the first campaign ever organised by Philips Electronics Singapore.

The company also held a roadshow over the weekend where people were asked to pledge to make a simple switch from incandescent light bulbs to energy-saving alternatives.

As part of its commitment to sustainability, Philips is also donating about $28,000 in cash and products, including 270 energy efficient desk lamps, to schools and the community.

APPLICATIONS FOR SCHOLARSHIP OPEN TODAY

Applications for the Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship is open from today till Dec 9.

Launched in 1992, it is the post-graduate equivalent of the President’s Scholarship.

The Lee Kuan Yew Scholarship commemorates the contributions made by Singapore’s Minister Mentor to the country, and 26 Singaporeans have been awarded the scholarship so far.

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